QUITE CONTRARY

ST. JOHN ERVINE

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MARY, MARY QUITE CONTRARY

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MARY, MARY QUITE CONTRARY

A Light Comedy in Four Acts

by

ST. JOHN ERVINE

GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD
RUSKIN HOUSE
MUSEUM STREET LONDON

First published in Great Britain in 1923
Second Impression . . 1925
Third Impression . . 1931
Fourth Impression . . 1949

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THE FIRST ACT

The Garden of Hinton St. Henry Vicarage.
Friday afternoon.

THE SECOND ACT

The drawing-room of Hinton St. Henry Vicarage.
Friday evening.

THE THIRD ACT

Same as Act II. Saturday morning.

THE FOURTH ACT

Same as Act I. Saturday afternoon.

The time is the present.

CHARACTERS

In the order of their appearance.

MRS. CONSIDINE.

SHEILA, her niece.

GEOFFREY, her son.

SIR HENRY CONSIDINE, K.C.M.G., formerly Governor of Andabar, her brother-in-law.

REV. CANON PETER CONSIDINE, M.A., Vicar of Hinton St. Henry, her husband.

MARY WESTLAKE (MRS. JAMES WESTLAKE).

MR. HOBBS, her manager.

JENNY, a maid.

MISS MIMMS.

MR. BEEBY.

THE FIRST ACT

The scene is the garden of Hinton St. Henry Vicarage on the afternoon of a Friday in August. Hinton St. Henry is a fishing village on the south coast of England, "just far enough from London," as MRS. CONSIDINE *says, "to keep you in touch with the people you like and out of touch with the people you don't!"* MRS. CONSIDINE, *a pleasant, sensible woman of fifty or so, is sitting at a small, round table in a shaded place, sewing.* SHEILA CONSIDINE, *her niece, a pretty girl of twenty-four, is sitting on the other side of the table. She looks up once or twice, as if about to speak, but—perhaps because she is reluctant to put her thoughts plainly or because she is inexpert in expressing them—she does not do so.* MRS. CONSIDINE *reaches for the scissors, which are lying on* SHEILA'S *side of the table, and as she takes them up, she says:*

MRS. CONSIDINE. I hope they won't be late for tea!

SHEILA (*abstractedly*). Who, Auntie?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Your uncles, darling!

SHEILA. Oh, yes!

MRS. CONSIDINE. I'd like them to be here when Mrs. Westlake arrives. I'm sure she'll feel more at ease if there's a crowd to welcome her.

SHEILA. Auntie, is she a good actress?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Do you mean morally, darling, or technically?

SHEILA. I suppose I mean both, but what I really want to know is whether she's an actress or just pretty.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Geoffrey says she's both. Why do you ask?

SHEILA. Curiosity! He seems very interested in her.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Well, that's natural, isn't it? When a famous actress accepts a play by a young, unknown poet,

he's rather inclined to take an interest in her. We're all attracted by the stage, Sheila, if we're young enough. When I was a girl I once wrote to Mr. Wilson Barrett.

SHEILA (*again abstracted*). Did you, Auntie?

MRS. CONSIDINE. You're not interested, my dear! . . .

SHEILA (*rousing herself*). Oh, but I! . . .

MRS. CONSIDINE (*interrupting*). Neither was he! He didn't answer my letter, so I ceased to take any further interest in the drama, and married your uncle. I suppose, though, if there's anything in heredity, I must have transmitted my interest to Geoffrey, and that's why he's written a play. There's no other explanation!

SHEILA (*getting up and turning away*). Of course, I'm very glad that Mrs. Westlake's accepted Geoffrey's play, only . . .

MRS. CONSIDINE. Only what?

SHEILA. Oh, nothing!

MRS. CONSIDINE. Nothing, my dear?

SHEILA. Well, I . . . I hope he isn't going to be *too* interested in her.

MRS. CONSIDINE. My dear, he's much too interested in you. (*As* SHEILA *makes a gesture of dissent.*) Oh, yes, he is. He hasn't said anything to his father or to me, but old people are much more observant than young people imagine, and I'm sure he's very fond of you, Sheila. And I'm so glad! . . .

SHEILA (*with sudden abandon, coming behind her aunt and putting her arms about her neck*). Oh, Auntie, I know it isn't quite the thing for a girl to say what she feels about a man! . . .

MRS. CONSIDINE. She wouldn't be very tactful if she did.

SHEILA. I'm frightfully fond of Geoffrey!

MRS. CONSIDINE (*patting the girl's hands*). I'm sure you are. If I were your age, I should probably be very fond of him myself.

SHEILA. I *do* want him to be famous and successful, but (*moving away again*) I can't bear to hear him talking all the time of Mrs. Westlake and her rotten temperament! . . .

MRS. CONSIDINE. My dear child! . . .

SHEILA. I'm jealous, Auntie . . . horribly jealous!

MRS. CONSIDINE. I'm very glad to hear it, but I hope you'll be intelligently jealous. If Geoffrey falls in love with Mrs. Westlake he will only be doing what all nice, well-bred boys ought to do! . . .

SHEILA (*returning to her original seat and sitting down*). Auntie!

MRS. CONSIDINE. She is probably a brilliant and charming woman. A nice boy ought to fall in love with such a woman at some time of his life, and it's better for him to do it before he's married than after. Really, it'll be a compliment to you, Sheila.

SHEILA. That's the sort of compliment I prefer to be without. Supposing he marries her! . . .

MRS. CONSIDINE. He can't. She's married already.

SHEILA. I don't suppose that'll worry him!

MRS. CONSIDINE. Sheila, dear! Nice boys don't do such things!

SHEILA. Oh, don't they? Nice boys are simply bad boys who haven't been found out. I didn't drive a motor-ambulance in the war for nothing, Auntie!

MRS. CONSIDINE. I always said that war was a mistake. Well, we must just hope for the best. I think Geoffrey has common sense as well as brilliance, and that ought to be useful to him. A brilliant man ought not to marry a brilliant woman. They'd be miserable through envy of each other.

SHEILA. I'm not brilliant. I'm solid!

MRS. CONSIDINE. Yes, dear. That's why I want you to marry Geoffrey. You'll look after him all the better for not being brilliant, and he'll love you very dearly when he discovers that you aren't as clever as he is. The successful marriage is the one in which the husband believes that he's clever and the wife pretends that she's not. The result is perfect bliss—for the husband. But you mustn't be too exacting. Mix your jealousy with intelligence!

[GEOFFREY CONSIDINE *enters from the house. He is a handsome lad of twenty-five, inclined, perhaps, to dress up the part of the poet, but not to the point of eccentricity, for he cannot entirely escape from the influence of Rugby, where he was educated.*]

GEOFFREY (*on the steps*). Hillo!

MRS. CONSIDINE. Ah, Geoffrey, we were just talking about you!

SHEILA (*in an undertone*). Auntie!

GEOFFREY (*coming to them*). What were you saying?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Nothing that we'd like you to hear. What have you been doing?

GEOFFREY. Working.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Tell us what Mrs. Westlake is like, Geoffrey. Sheila wants to know.

SHEILA. Auntie, I! . . .

GEOFFREY. Do you, Sheila?

SHEILA. No. I'm not interested in Mrs. Westlake.

GEOFFREY. Well, I'll tell you about her all the same. She's an extraordinary woman.

SHEILA (*going to the other end of the garden*). All women are extraordinary.

GEOFFREY. Oh, no, they're not. Most women are obvious! But she's wonderful! So spontaneous, so incalculable. At one moment, she has the simple, demanding nature of a child, and at the next, the imperious manner of an empress.

SHEILA. She sounds exactly like a film-actress.

MRS. CONSIDINE (*to* GEOFFREY). I'm sure you've spent the whole morning and afternoon inventing that speech.

GEOFFREY (*reproachfully*). Mother! . . .

SHEILA. I hope Mrs. Westlake will like it when she hears it.

GEOFFREY. But I don't intend to say it to her.

MRS. CONSIDINE. You may not intend to do so, dear, but you probably will. My experience of literary people is that they never waste a phrase! . . .

GEOFFREY: I've no intention of talking to Mrs. Westlake about herself.

SHEILA. Then what's she coming for?

GEOFFREY. To discuss my play. Aren't you being rather sharp this afternoon, Sheila?

SHEILA (*turning away*). I don't think so.

GEOFFREY (*sitting down in* SHEILA'S *seat and addressing his mother*). She wants to have a proper business talk with me. That's why she's bringing Hobbs.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Who is Mr. Hobbs?

GEOFFREY. Her business manager.

SHEILA. I suppose he isn't her husband?

GEOFFREY. Oh, no! His name's Hobbs.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Is that a disqualification?

GEOFFREY. No, but it makes a difference, doesn't it?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Then who is Mr. Westlake?

GEOFFREY. Mrs. Westlake's husband.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Hasn't he any other occupation?

GEOFFREY. I don't know!

SHEILA (*impatiently*). Well, what is he? Who is he?

GEOFFREY (*very deliberately at first*). My dear Sheila, I don't know. Feelings of delicacy prevented me from asking. He lives abroad, I think, or is he dead? Hobbs did say once that Mrs. Westlake's temperament had been too much for him, and he thought he'd be happier if he had the whole of the Atlantic between him and it. That's all I know about him.

SHEILA. Considering how much interest you take in Mrs. Westlake, it's very strange you take so little in her husband.

GEOFFREY. There's nothing strange about that! I don't see why, just because you're interested in a man's wife, you should be interested in him.

MRS. CONSIDINE. My dear, I don't want to seem old-fashioned, but really your conversation is almost immoral.

GEOFFREY (*kissing her*). Funny old mother! (*He looks at his watch.*) I say, I shall have to hurry. Their train is due in ten minutes.

SHEILA. I wonder if Johnson's motor-car will be big enough for her. She's sure to bring mountains of luggage. Those sort of people always do.

MRS. CONSIDINE (*to* GEOFFREY). If you see your father and your Uncle Henry, tell them to hurry home.

GEOFFREY. Very well, mother. (*To* SHEILA.) I don't like you when you're trying to be clever!

SHEILA (*inarticulate with anger*). Oh! . . .

GEOFFREY. Ah, la, la! (*He goes off.*)

MRS. CONSIDINE. You didn't do that well, Sheila!

SHEILA. Can't you see he's infatuated with her!

MRS. CONSIDINE. No, I can't. He speaks very flippantly about her.

SHEILA. But that's the worst possible sign! Things have changed very much since your day. I first knew that Geoffrey cared for me when I overheard him saying the most insulting things about me! . . .

MRS. CONSIDINE. My dear, he never insulted you!

SHEILA. Yes, he did, and I was so happy! . . . (*Blubbering a little.*) It's all the fault of that beastly actress. I wish Uncle Henry would fall in love with her.

MRS. CONSIDINE. But, my dear, your uncle has retired from active service.

[*Enter from the road*, SIR HENRY CONSIDINE, K.C.M.G., *formerly Governor of Andabar.* SIR HENRY *is a tall, handsome man, rather humourless, with a touching and unshakable faith in himself. He wears the correct country clothes with the correct air of distinction. His age is fifty-three, but he looks rather less than that.*]

SIR HENRY (*who has overheard* MRS. CONSIDINE'S *last remark*). What did you say I've done?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Oh Henry, I'm so glad you've come! Where's Peter?

SIR HENRY. I left him in the village, talking to Miss Mimms. I gathered that one of the Boy Scouts refused to do his good deed this morning, and she's asked Peter to put him in a more Scoutly frame of mind. What were you two saying about me as I came in?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Sheila wants you to fall in love with Mrs. Westlake.

SIR HENRY. Good heavens! . . .

SHEILA (*appealingly*). Please, Uncle Henry!

SIR HENRY. But, my dear Sheila! . . .

SHEILA. Well, why not? It isn't right for a great, hulking man like you to go about the world unmarried. Besides, you'd be doing me a kindness.

SIR HENRY. I don't want to do you a kindness—not that sort!

MRS. CONSIDINE. Sheila thinks that Geoffrey is in danger of losing his head over Mrs. Westlake, and she wants you to sacrifice yourself to save him.

SIR HENRY. Does she? Well, I don't propose to sacrifice myself for him or for anybody else. Self-sacrifice, Sheila, is no doubt an excellent virtue, but I prefer to admire it rather than to give an exhibition of it. (*Sits down.*)

SHEILA. Well, I think you're very selfish! You lead a perfectly useless life! . . .

SIR HENRY. Useless! Ha! I've given my best years to the service of my country. Let me tell you that! I lost my health and almost lost my life while I was Governor of Andabar! . . .

SHEILA. Everybody knows you nearly caused a revolution!

SIR HENRY (*jumping up*). Silence, girl! It's bad enough to have things like that printed in the gutter press, but in one's own home! . . . (*He sits down again.*)

SHEILA. Well, it's true, and the least you can do to compensate your country is to marry Mrs. Westlake.

SIR HENRY. I will not marry Mrs. Westlake or anybody. I've suffered enough for my country! . . .

SHEILA. You've suffered nothing.

SIR HENRY. Nothing!!!

SHEILA. You're always complaining about your health, but you have a terrific appetite! I know! I've watched you! . . .

SIR HENRY (*to* MRS. CONSIDINE). Mildred, I appeal to you, do I over-eat myself?

MRS. CONSIDINE. No, Henry. You've got one of those robust appetites from which so many invalids seem to suffer, but I shouldn't say you were ravenous.

SIR HENRY. Thank you, Mildred! (*To* SHEILA.) I have complete control over myself in *all* departments of life. As for this affair between Geoffrey and Mrs. Westlake, there's no need for extreme measures. I'm quite capable of dealing with it in a diplomatic manner! . . .

SHEILA. Then we may expect the worst.

SIR HENRY (*with a great effort*). My dear Sheila, I will not let myself be annoyed by you. You are young and inexperienced, and you know very little about life! . . .

SHEILA. I know a great deal about life! I've read the whole of Bernard Shaw's plays.

SIR HENRY (*smiling benignantly*). My dear, when you acknowledge that, you acknowledge that you are completely obsolete. Leave this matter to me. I know how to handle it.

SHEILA. How?

SIR HENRY. By tact! Tact, Sheila! A quality with which your generation seems to be singularly unacquainted.

[*Enter the* REVEREND CANON PETER CONSIDINE, M.A., *Vicar of Hinton St. Henry, in a state of bewilderment. He is a few years older than his brother, and rather more benign in character.*]

CANON CONSIDINE. My dear, can I have a large glass of water?

SHEILA. I'll go and get it for you, Uncle Peter.

CANON CONSIDINE. Thank you, Sheila.

[SHEILA *goes into the house.*

MRS. CONSIDINE. Are you ill, dear?

CANON CONSIDINE. No, but I've just had a conversation with Miss Mimms, and I feel thirsty.

SIR HENRY. Have this chair, Peter?

CANON CONSIDINE (*seating himself*). Thank you, Henry. (*To* MRS. CONSIDINE.) Have they arrived yet?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Who?

CANON CONSIDINE. The theatricals.

SIR HENRY. My dear Peter, you mustn't call them *that.*

CANON CONSIDINE. Why not? They *are* theatrical, aren't they?

SIR HENRY. Not if they can help it. The modern actress would rather be anything than an actress—and generally is.

CANON CONSIDINE. Well, *have* they arrived yet?

MRS. CONSIDINE. No, but they'll be here at any moment. Geoffrey's gone to meet them.

[SHEILA *returns with the glass of water, which she carries to her* UNCLE PETER.]

SHEILA. Here you are, Uncle. Straight from the tap!

CANON CONSIDINE (*taking the glass*). Thank you, my dear. I wonder why it is that the most enthusiastic church-workers always make a clergyman feel embarrassed

I know that Miss Mimms is a good woman, but she makes me feel that there must have been some justification for the lions that ate the Early Christians! (*Drinks.*)

[*The sound of a motor-horn is heard, and the noise of an approaching car.*]

MRS. CONSIDINE (*rising and going towards the road*). This must be they. Peter, come and help me to welcome them.

[*She goes out.*

CANON CONSIDINE. Very well, my dear! (*Hastily gulps down rest of water.*) I do hope they won't be too theatrical. Anything dramatic always make me feel uncomfortable.

[*He goes out.*

SHEILA (*going to* SIR HENRY). Uncle Henry, I'm sorry I was rude to you just now.

SIR HENRY. That's all right, Sheila. You're young, and all young people nowadays are rude to their elders.

SHEILA. I didn't mean to be rude, but I can't help pointing things out to you! Will you help me? I shan't have much chance against this actress woman.

SIR HENRY (*taking her hand and patting it*). I'll do what I can.

[*Enter* MRS. CONSIDINE.

MRS. CONSIDINE (*talking to* MRS. WESTLAKE *who is not yet visible*). Come this way, Mrs. Westlake! Mind! There's a nasty little place there! That's right! . . .

[*Enter* MARY WESTLAKE, *a beautiful actress with an artificial manner which is entirely natural to her. She might be thirty-five years of age, and she might be forty-five, but she says she cannot count after thirty-six.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, it was a nasty little place! But how beautiful your home is. I always think it's such a beautiful thing to have a beautiful home.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Oh, yes! Yes! Quite so! This is my niece, Sheila Considine.

SHEILA (*abruptly*). How d'do?

MRS. WESTLAKE (*going to her*). You must be very happy in this beautiful home.

SHEILA. Oh, it isn't bad!

MRS. CONSIDINE. And this is my brother-in-law, Sir Henry Considine.

SIR HENRY. I'm delighted to meet you, Mrs. Westlake. I've often seen you act.

MRS. WESTLAKE. How nice for you! (*To* MRS. CONSIDINE.) I don't wonder that your son is a poet. How can anyone help being inspired in such lovely scenery? There's nothing like it on the stage. Do you write poetry, Sir Henry?

SIR HENRY. No, I can't say I do, but I'm engaged at present on a history of marriage in Andabar.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Really!

SIR HENRY. Of course, the subject is not one which can be discussed in mixed company, especially when there are young and inexperienced people present. But it's very interesting.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'm sure it is. Tell me, do they marry a great deal in Andabar?

SIR HENRY. They do—excessively!

MRS. WESTLAKE. How revolting! You and I must have a little quiet talk about Andabar.

SIR HENRY. I shall be delighted.

MRS. CONSIDINE. You'd like to go to your room! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Thank you. (*To* SIR HENRY.) Poetry's such a nice thing to write.

SIR HENRY. So I believe.

MRS. WESTLAKE (*following* MRS. CONSIDINE, *who has mounted the steps*). I'm sure you could do it if you tried hard enough. (*Pausing on the steps and turning to him.*) I wish you'd write a poem while I'm here.

SIR HENRY. You're very flattering, Mrs. Westlake.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Not at all. Anyone who can write a history of marriage ought to be able to write poetry! (*To* MRS. CONSIDINE.) This way?

[*She goes into the house with* MRS. CONSIDINE.

SHEILA. Keep it up, Uncle Henry! You've made an impression already.

SIR HENRY. Ha, my dear, that's nothing!

[CANON CONSIDINE, *followed by* MR. HOBBS, *enters.* HOBBS *is a stoutly-built, stocky little man, aged about forty-seven, a good-natured, unimpressionable*

vulgarian—the only man in her experience who has not been imposed upon by MRS. WESTLAKE.]

CANON CONSIDINE. Come in, come in . . . er . . . Mr. Hobbs!

MR. HOBBS (*entering*). Thank you!

CANON CONSIDINE. Geoffrey will take the car and the luggage round to the back of the vicarage! . . . Let me see, you don't know my niece, do you? . . .

SHEILA
HOBBS } (*simultaneously*). How do you do?

CANON CONSIDINE. Or my brother, Sir Henry Considine?

HOBBS (*going to* SIR HENRY *and shaking hands with him*). Pleased to meet you, Sir 'Enry.

SIR HENRY (*affably*). I hope you had a pleasant journey.

HOBBS. Not bad!

CANON CONSIDINE. What do you think of our village, Mr. Hobbs?

HOBBS. Not bad—what I've seen of it. Bit too far from Shaftesbury Avenue for my taste.

CANON CONSIDINE. From where?

HOBBS. Shaftesbury Avenue.

CANON CONSIDINE. I don't quite know where that is.

HOBBS. Don't know where Shaftesbury Avenue is! You're English, aren't you?

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, but I'm a little out of things—living in the country all the year round.

HOBBS. Oh, yes, of course! I was forgetting that! Fancy not knowing where Shaftesbury Avenue is! I thought the 'eathen in 'is blindness knew that!

SIR HENRY. Your life must be a very interesting one, Mr. Hobbs.

HOBBS. Well, it is and it isn't. The theatrical business is a very tricky one. Very tricky!

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, I'm sure it is.

HOBBS. I've been in it all my life, and I reckon I know something about it. I began as a call-boy, and *now* look at me!

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes! Very remarkable!

HOBBS. My job is about as 'ard as any job. I 'ave to keep Mrs. Westlake's imagination in its place, and let

me tell you, that's a damned ! . . . Oh, I beg your pardon, I'm sure !

CANON CONSIDINE. Not at all ! I quite often say worse than that myself.

HOBBS. Well, it's a *very* hard thing to do ! She lives for 'er art, and that's a most expensive way of living. Do you know, she took an Eastern play once—one of those pieces where it costs a fortune to undress the company ! . . .

CANON CONSIDINE. *Un*dress them !

HOBBS. Yes. They don't 'ardly wear anything, and it costs a lot to do it. Well, she was an empress or something . . . sort of Cleopatra, you know . . . and she got it into 'er 'ead that she ought to 'ave a retinoo of Noobian slaves.

SIR HENRY. Nubian slaves !

HOBBS. Yes. Noobian ! No other kind would do ! Well, she goes and gives an order for ninety of 'em. Ninety Noobian slaves ! Of course, I put a stop to that. They ain't so easy to get, apart from the cost of 'em. " No," I says to 'er, " we'll get a couple of 'alf-castes from Cardiff. They'll do just as well an' be a lot cheaper ! " And so they was.

CANON CONSIDINE. Dear me ! *Dear* me ! ! This is a side of theatrical life of which I had no idea.

HOBBS. Oh, it's a very queer profession, ours. I could tell you some things that would astonish you !

CANON CONSIDINE (*hurriedly*). Yes, I suppose you could, but wouldn't you like to go in and see your room ?

HOBBS. Thank you. (*They go towards the house.*) What I can never understand about people in the country is what they do with themselves. In the evening, I mean.

CANON CONSIDINE. Oh, well, we amuse ourselves in a variety of ways. Don't we, Henry ?

SIR HENRY. Oh yes !

CANON CONSIDINE. I, for example, often play a game of patience.

HOBBS. Well, I suppose it's all right if you've been brought up to it. This way ?

CANON CONSIDINE. If you please !

[*Exeunt* CANON *and* HOBBS.

SHEILA. What a little toad!

SIR HENRY. Oh, my dear Sheila, you mustn't be so harsh in your judgments. I don't think you should use Mr. Hobbs's appearance as evidence against him.

[*Enter* GEOFFREY.

GEOFFREY. Where's everybody?

SIR HENRY. Whom do you mean by everybody?

GEOFFREY. Mrs. Westlake, of course. Where is she?

SIR HENRY. Renovating herself, I believe.

GEOFFREY. She wants me to read the play to you all, so that she can see what effect it has on quite ordinary people.

SIR HENRY. That's very thoughtful of her!

GEOFFREY. I'm to read the first two acts before tea and the rest afterwards.

SIR HENRY. Well, thank goodness, there'll be an interval for refreshments!

GEOFFREY. Isn't she a lovely woman? Isn't she, Sheila?

SHEILA (*off-handedly*). I didn't notice.

GEOFFREY. Oh, but you must have noticed. My dear girl, she's beautiful.

SHEILA. Indeed!

GEOFFREY. Yes. I'm not very keen on Hobbs, though!

SIR HENRY. No, he hasn't quite the same style of beauty, has he?

GEOFFREY. He's so patronizing. When I asked him if he liked the country, he sniffed a bit, and then said, "Well, I suppose we 'ave to 'ave it!" Common little Cockney! I must go and get my manuscript! (*He goes towards the house, but stops on the steps and speaks to* SIR HENRY.) Hobbs doesn't like poetic drama.

SIR HENRY. I imagined he was hardly likely to.

GEOFFREY. No. But Mary does.

SHEILA. Mary!

GEOFFREY. Yes, Mrs. Westlake. She said I might call her "Mary."

SIR HENRY. And what does she propose to call you?

GEOFFREY. I didn't like to ask her. You see, she's inclined to be original in her choice of names for people. She calls Hobbs "Chim"!

SIR HENRY. Chim! Why Chim?

GEOFFREY. Short for "chimpanzee"! Jolly good, isn't it?

SIR HENRY (*dubiously*). Yes, but I hope she doesn't make a habit of these contractions.

GEOFFREY. Oh, she calls everybody something or other. It's her way of putting people at their ease.

[*Enter* MRS. CONSIDINE.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Oh, Geoffrey, Mrs. Westlake asked me to remind you about reading the play to her. She wants it read before tea.

SIR HENRY. Not the whole of it!

GEOFFREY. No, only the first two acts. I've just been telling them, mother.

MRS. CONSIDINE (*going to her brother-in-law.* GEOFFREY *follows*). She asked me your age, Henry, and whether we had a pet name for you?

SIR HENRY. Oh!

MRS. CONSIDINE. She says you look as if you knew a great deal about life.

SIR HENRY. Well, I certainly know something about it.

MRS. CONSIDINE. But she thinks it's a pity you aren't married.

SIR HENRY. Indeed! Have I any other defects?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Yes. She thinks you talk too much.

SIR HENRY. My God!

GEOFFREY. Well, you are rather a gabbler, Uncle Henry.

SIR HENRY. I am not.

[MRS. WESTLAKE *enters. She has removed her outdoor garments, and is without a hat.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE (*extending her hands to* GEOFFREY, *which he kisses with some enthusiasm*). Ah, my poet! But where's the play?

GEOFFREY. I'll go and get it. I shan't be long.

[*He rushes into the house.*

MRS. WESTLAKE (*extending her hand to* SIR HENRY). How do you do, Sir Henry? (*She evidently expects him to kiss her hand, too, but he shakes it instead.*)

SIR HENRY. I haven't altered since we last met, Mrs. Westlake.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I've been hearing a great deal about your life, Sir Henry. So mysterious and full of strange adventures.

SIR HENRY. I . . . I don't think so!

MRS. WESTLAKE. You great viceroys, Sir Henry, what wonderful lives you lead!

SIR HENRY (*gratified at being called a viceroy*). Well, yes, perhaps, though I was not exactly a viceroy, Mrs. Westlake. Still, the governorship of Andabar was a grave responsibility.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'm sure it was. The people you governed must have realized that.

SIR HENRY. Yes, I think they did. Are you interested in our Colonial policy, Mrs. Westlake?

MRS. WESTLAKE. No. Are you?

SIR HENRY (*nonplussed*). Well, yes. That's my occupation!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Then, of course, you must be interested in it. How nice for you, now that you've retired. (*To* SHEILA.) How do you do?

SHEILA. We've met before, Mrs. Westlake. About five minutes ago.

MRS. WESTLAKE. But it's so nice to meet people again, even if you haven't liked them the first time. (*To* SIR HENRY.) Tell me, is it far to the Colonies?

SIR HENRY. Well, it depends on which one you want to go to.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Are there a lot?

SIR HENRY. Oh, yes! Some of them are a long way off and some of them aren't.

MRS. WESTLAKE. That must make it very awkward for the people who govern them. I think they ought all to be together, don't you? So that they can be governed conveniently. The only colony I know is the Isle of Man! . . .

SIR HENRY. The Isle of Man isn't a colony!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, it must be. How else can you account for it? When people ask me what I think of Hall Caine, I always say "He's a Colonial!" That seems to explain everything.

SIR HENRY. I'm afraid, Mrs. Westlake, your knowledge of our Empire is somewhat limited.

MRS. WESTLAKE. That's true. My whole view of life is limited. I've not had your advantages, Sir Henry. I haven't *lived* as you have. I've always said I'd love to . . . to . . . meet one of those strong, garrulous men who've made us what we are!

SIR HENRY (*coughing with embarrassment*). Well, how do you like the country?

MRS. WESTLAKE. I love it. I said to Chim when we were coming down in the train—he was asleep, mind you—I said, "Chim, wake up and look at the scenery. It's so *smart*!" (*To* SHEILA.) How do you do?

SHEILA. I'm still quite well, thank you! (*She goes into the house in something like a temper.*)

MRS. WESTLAKE. What a transparent nature she has. It must be very nice for you all.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Sheila is a dear girl, Mrs. Westlake. We're hoping that Geoffrey and she will . . . well! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes. Yes, I thought so. Does he know?

MRS. CONSIDINE. He's very fond of Sheila.

MRS. WESTLAKE. She must be glad. It's so nice to think that someone is fond of you. Isn't it, Sir Henry?

SIR HENRY. Really, Mrs. Westlake, I haven't the slightest idea.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh—h—h! You won't make me believe that a man so attractive and clever as you are, has never been loved.

SIR HENRY. Mrs. Westlake, you're a very acute woman, but really, I . . . I can't discuss these matters! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. I know. The secrets of the heart! . . . (*To* CANON CONSIDINE, *who enters, followed by* HOBBS.) I'm so glad you're a clergyman! I think the Church is such a nice institution.

CANON CONSIDINE. Thank you! Thank you!!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Chim is an atheist!

HOBBS. Oh, come, come, I've told you more than once that I'm a Presbyterian.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I know. And it's dreadful! Think of what will happen to you on the Last Day when you tell the authorities that you're a Presbyterian. Canon Considine, can't you do something for Chim!

CANON CONSIDINE. My dear lady, I don't think I can intrude upon Mr. Chim's private affairs! . . .

HOBBS. 'Obbs, sir, 'Obbs! Not Chim!

CANON CONSIDINE. I beg your pardon! I thought Mrs. Westlake called you "Chim"!

HOBBS. That's her pet name for me. My right name's 'Obbs!

CANON CONSIDINE. Oh yes, of course! But I don't think that I can do anything. If a man is a Presbyterian, knowingly and wilfully, he has only himself to blame!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Then, Chim, you must save yourself.

HOBBS. That's what I'm trying to do. (GEOFFREY *enters, carrying the MS. of his play.*)

MRS. WESTLAKE. Ah, my poet at last!

GEOFFREY. I'm awfully nervous, Mrs. Westlake . . . Mary, I mean . . . at the thought of reading my play to you, with everybody listening! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Shall I send Chim away?

GEOFFREY. Oh, no! I'd like him to hear it.

HOBBS. Thank you! It'll be a bit of a treat for me.

MRS. WESTLAKE. We ought to arrange ourselves, I think. Let me see! (*To* GEOFFREY.) I think you ought to have the centre of the stage! . . .

CANON CONSIDINE. Centre of the stage!

HOBBS. Technical term, sir, in the profession, meaning the best position or all the fat. I suppose in your business you'd call it the pulpit!

MRS. WESTLAKE (*placing* GEOFFREY *in a quite obscure position*). If you sit there and I (*indicating the centre of the scene*) sit here, our positions will be about right, I think.

GEOFFREY. Any position will suit me.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Then if the others will just group themselves around you! . . .

[*She makes them sit close to* GEOFFREY, *and then takes her seat, in splendid isolation, in the centre of the scene.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE. Now, Geoffrey, we're quite ready!

GEOFFREY (*self-consciously, as he unfolds the MS.*). I'm afraid I shall read it badly! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Never mind. You won't have to act it. Go on!

GEOFFREY (*spreading out the MS. and then, after a little cough of embarrassment*). Joan of Arc. A poetic play! . . .

[SHEILA *enters.* MRS. WESTLAKE *immediately rises, interrupting the reading.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE. How do you do? You're just in time to hear Geoffrey begin his play.

[SHEILA *joins the group round* GEOFFREY.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'm afraid we're interrupting you Geoffrey!

GEOFFREY (*with just a shade of annoyance in his tone*). Not at all. But when you're ready! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE (*oracularly to the others*). A poet ought never to be interrupted. His nature is so sensitive that the slightest disturbance upsets him. I think it must require a great deal of courage to be a poet's wife.

CANON CONSIDINE (*who feels that someone ought to say something*). Oh, yes! Yes!

MRS. WESTLAKE. I have never loved a poet.

CANON CONSIDINE. Really!

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'm sure my nature would have been improved if I had loved a poet or been loved by one.

CANON CONSIDINE. Perhaps you're right. Perhaps you're right!

HOBBS. In my opinion, there's nothing in it, neither passion nor publicity! A poet is so much in love with 'imself that 'e 'asn't got time to love anybody else.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, but Chim, think of Shelley and Byron and Shakespeare!

HOBBS (*with intense disgust*). Shakespeare! That 'ighbrow! Put one of 'is plays on and you'll land yourself in the Bankruptcy Court. That's what your poetry'll do for you.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Chim has no soul! I told you he was an atheist.

HOBBS (*jumping up in protest*). No, no, no, no, NO!

MRS. WESTLAKE. You're interrupting the play. Geoffrey, I apologize to you for Chim's misbehaviour! . . .

HOBBS. I say! . . . Look 'ere!! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Be silent! (HOBBS *sits down.*) Go on, Geoffrey!

GEOFFREY (*reading*). Joan of Arc, a poetic play in five acts!

HOBBS. Five acts!

GEOFFREY. Yes, Mr. Hobbs.

HOBBS It's too long. It's all right for the pit, of course, but think of the stalls, old man! They 'ave to 'ave their dinner!

GEOFFREY (*angrily*). I'm not going to adapt my play to suit the stalls' stomach!

HOBBS. All right! I'm only pointing out the practical side of the question.

GEOFFREY. And now, perhaps, I'll be allowed to read the play.

HOBBS. I tell you, as a practical man of the theatre, that any play which prevents the stalls from enjoying its dinner in peace and comfort is a bad play.

GEOFFREY (*rising angrily*). Do you mean that my play is bad?

HOBBS. No, I 'aven't 'eard it yet.

MRS. WESTLAKE. And whose fault is that? Yours!

HOBBS All I say, as a practical man, is this: Any play that begins before 'alf-past eight is rotten!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Chim, I am patiently waiting to hear the play! . . .

HOBBS. I'm sorry I interrupted. I don't think I began it, but I'm sorry. Go on Mr. Considine.

GEOFFREY (*very emphatically*). Joan of Arc, a poetic play in five acts, by Geoffrey Considine.

MRS. WESTLAKE. That sounds very beautiful. (*She says the following passage a little theatrically.*) Joan of Arc, a poetic play in five acts, by Geoffrey Considine. Very beautiful. Go on.

GEOFFREY. The scene is laid in an orchard in Lorraine in the afternoon of a summer day in the year 1425! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Nearly five hundred years ago! How time does fly!

GEOFFREY (*reading*). Joan of Arc, whose age is thirteen! . . .

HOBBS. Thirteen! Do you mean to say Mrs. Westlake has got to be thirteen! . . .

GEOFFREY. Yes, in this scene. Joan was only thirteen when she first saw visions.

HOBBS (*to* MRS. WESTLAKE). You can't do it!

MRS. WESTLAKE. And why not?

HOBBS. Well, isn't it obvious? Nobody'd ever believe you were only thirteen.

GEOFFREY. Juliet wasn't fourteen when Romeo first met her.

HOBBS. I always said there was something silly about that play. Any'ow, its ridic'lous to ask 'er at 'er age! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. My age! And what is my age?

HOBBS. I don't exactly know, but it's more than thirteen.

SIR HENRY. Don't you think the difficulty might be overcome by engaging a child to play Joan in the first scene! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. No. I have played Juliet! . . .

HOBBS. Yes, but that was years ago!

MRS. WESTLAKE. And I shall play the part of Joan of Arc, thirteen or no thirteen. I am an actress, and I have no age.

HOBBS. All right. 'Ave it your own way. Only don't blame me.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I blame no one but myself for anything. I accept full responsibility for my own acts! . . .

HOBBS. Well, I 'ope you'll remember that when this play's been produced. (*To* GEOFFREY.) 'Ow does it end?

GEOFFREY. Joan is burned to death in Rouen! . . .

HOBBS. Burned to death! Well, that's an 'appy end if you like. That'll please the pit, that will!

CANON CONSIDINE. But Joan of Arc *was* burned to death! . . .

HOBBS. Yes, but that's 'istory! This is a play! (*To* GEOFFREY.) Can't you make the end a bit 'appier! Can't you 'ave 'er rescued at the last moment by 'er lover! . . .

GEOFFREY. No, Mr. Hobbs, I can't.

HOBBS. Well, it'll be a frost then! That's all! I'm sorry to keep on interrupting like this, but I 'ave to think of the practical side. (*To* GEOFFREY.) Do you

really think the British public will come to see a poetic play in five acts with Mary Westlake roasted alive at the end of it?

SHEILA. I should think a lot of people would be very glad to see that.

MRS. WESTLAKE (*aside*). I don't think she likes me.

GEOFFREY (*almost desperately*). Joan of Arc, a poetic play in five acts, by Geoffrey Considine. The scene is laid . . .

[*A* MAID *enters.*

MAID (*to* MRS. CONSIDINE). Please, ma'am, will you have the tea here or in the drawing-room?

MRS. CONSIDINE. We'll have it in the drawing-room. (*Exit* MAID. *To the others.*) There are so many flies and wasps about now. Won't you come in, please! Geoffrey, you can read the play afterwards.

HOBBS. Well, perhaps a cup of tea would be nice. What do you say, Miss Considine?

[*He and* SHEILA *and* MRS. CONSIDINE *go indoors, talking together.*]

CANON CONSIDINE. Well, well, this has been very interesting. I've never quite understood before how a play got produced. but I'm beginning to get an inkling of it. Just an inkling! Come along and have some tea, Mrs. Westlake. Henry!

SIR HENRY. You know, Peter, when I was in Andabar we did some amateur theatricals once, and I saw a little of the practical difficulties of the work. If Geoffrey had consulted me about this play, I think I could have helped him to avoid! . . .

[*They go into the house as he speaks, leaving* GEOFFREY *alone with* MRS. WESTLAKE.]

GEOFFREY. I'm afraid my play isn't satisfactory to you, Mrs. Westlake.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I thought you were going to call me "Mary"!

GEOFFREY. Yes, I know. I'm frightfully disappointed! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Because Chim talks like a business-manager. My dear, that's what he's paid to do. (*Putting*

her arm in his and making him walk up and down with her.) Come, come, that isn't the way to talk. I liked your play when you read the first version of it to me, and I'm sure I shall like it better now.

GEOFFREY. It's nice of you to say that. You know I've thought about you all the time I've been re-writing the play, and Joan of Arc is really you!

MRS. WESTLAKE. How very sweet of you!

GEOFFREY. The first time I ever saw you, I liked you so much that I went and stood at the stage-door until you came out.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Did you? What an unusual thing for a young man to do!

GEOFFREY. I wanted to tell you how much I loved your performance, but when you came, I just couldn't speak. I felt like a fool.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, I expect you did.

GEOFFREY. There was a lady with you, and you kissed her! . . .

MRS WESTLAKE. Kissed a woman?

GEOFFREY. Yes. I wished I had been in her place. I wanted to kiss you awfully!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Why didn't you?

GEOFFREY. Well, we'd not been introduced to each other and I thought you'd think it rather odd of me. But I wish I had.

[SHEILA *enters.*

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'll kiss you now. (*She leans forward and kisses him.*)

GEOFFREY. Oh, thank you! (*He kisses her in return.*)

SHEILA (*very coldly*). Aren't you two coming in to tea?

GEOFFREY (*starting*). Oh, yes, Sheila. Yes, we're coming.

SHEILA. I'm sorry to interrupt your theatrical arrangements, but Auntie sent me to call you.

[*She goes into the house.*

GEOFFREY. I say, she saw us kissing.

MRS. WESTLAKE. So she did. How dreadful for her! But how nice for me!

[*She goes into the house, and* GEOFFREY *picking up his MS. follows her.*]

THE SECOND ACT

It is the evening of the same day, after dinner, and MRS. CONSIDINE, MRS. WESTLAKE *and* SHEILA *are sitting in the Vicarage drawing-room waiting for coffee. The men are still in the dining-room. A door leads to the rest of the house, and French windows, now open, give on to the garden.* SHEILA *is strumming rather dispiritedly on the piano, while* MRS. CONSIDINE *talks to* MRS. WESTLAKE, *who is stretched on a sofa.*

MRS. CONSIDINE. So you really like Geoffrey's play, Mrs. Westlake.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I think it's wonderful, but then I always think a play is wonderful when it has a good part for me.

[*The door opens, and the* MAID, *carrying a coffee tray, enters. She takes coffee to* MRS. WESTLAKE, MRS. CONSIDINE, *and* SHEILA *in that order. When she has done so, she puts the tray on a small table and goes out.*]

MRS. CONSIDINE. It must be nice for an author when his leading lady likes his play.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, but it's very unusual. I wonder how long they'll take to drink their coffee.

MRS. CONSIDINE. The men? I don't know.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Isn't it absurd for us to leave the men alone in the dining-room?

MRS. CONSIDINE. I wonder if it is. I've often heard that after we go out the conversation becomes less discreet.

MRS. WESTLAKE. It's not true. I've listened many times, and I've heard worse in the drawing-room! . . .

MRS. CONSIDINE. My dear Mrs. Westlake! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, my dear, you know very well that when we want to say things that are not quite proper, we don't need to stay in the dining-room to do it. (*To* SHEILA.) What are you playing, Sheila ?

SHEILA (*rising from the piano and going to the window*). Oh, nothing ! Just strumming !

MRS. WESTLAKE. You don't like me.

SHEILA (*very embarrassed*). Mrs. Westlake, I . . . I hardly know you ! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. That isn't necessary. Lots of people dislike me who don't know me at all.

MRS. CONSIDINE. I'm sure you're quite mistaken about Sheila, Mrs. Westlake. Of course, she isn't demonstrative.

MRS. WESTLAKE. No, I've noticed that. But why does she dislike me ?

SHEILA. I haven't any feeling about you.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, I'd rather be disliked than ignored. Do you dislike me, Mrs. Considine ?

MRS. CONSIDINE. No, I'm afraid I don't.

MRS. WESTLAKE. But surely there is someone in the house who dislikes me. I shall feel very strange and uncomfortable if there isn't. May I have some sugar in my coffee ? I forgot to take some.

SHEILA. I'll get it for you.

[*She goes to the coffee-tray and picks up the sugar-bowl, which she carries to* MRS. WESTLAKE. *While she is doing this* MRS. WESTLAKE *continues her conversation with* MRS. CONSIDINE.]

MRS. WESTLAKE. Have you noticed that I have a meandering mind. (*To* SHEILA, *as she takes some of the sugar.*) I suppose you want to marry Geoffrey ?

SHEILA. Really, Mrs. Westlake ! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Why can't you be frank ? Why can't we all be frank ? I am. It's so much more fun.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Well, perhaps, if we're going to be as frank as all that, I'd better shut the windows.

MRS. WESTLAKE. No, don't do that. We shall get so stuffy if you do.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Yes, perhaps you're right. What were we saying ?

MRS. WESTLAKE. We were trying to pass away the time agreeably until the men came.

MRS. CONSIDINE. I hope they won't be much longer.

[*The* MAID *enters.*

MAID. Please, ma'am, Miss Mimms would like to speak to you for a moment. I told her you were engaged, but she said it was important and she wouldn't keep you very long.

MRS. CONSIDINE (*rising*). You'll excuse me, won't you Mrs. Westlake?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Ask her to come in here. I should like to see someone called "Mimms"!

MRS. CONSIDINE (*hesitating.*) Oh, well! . . . (*To the* MAID.) Show her in here Jenny!

MAID. Yes, ma'am. (*Exit.*)

MRS. CONSIDINE. Miss Mimms is a very zealous church-worker. The more disagreeable the duties are, the better she seems to like them.

MRS. WESTLAKE. But why "Mimms"?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Well, that's her name!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, but why?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Her father's name was Mimms! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Ah! the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children.

[*The door opens, and the* MAID *re-enters.*

MAID. Miss Mimms.

[*Enter* MISS MIMMS, *a stoutly built and very determined spinster, aged about fifty, who is dressed in the uniform of a commandant of the Girl Guides.*]

MRS. CONSIDINE. How do you do, Miss Mimms? Jenny, bring another cup and saucer. (*To* MISS MIMMS.) You'll have some coffee, won't you?

MISS MIMMS. No, thanks! I never take stimulants.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Oh, very well, Jenny. (*Exit* MAID.) Let me see, you don't know Mrs. Westlake?

MISS MIMMS. I know her reputation, of course. How do do? (*Shakes* MRS. WESTLAKE'S *hand very vigorously.*)

MRS. WESTLAKE. You probably know a great deal more about my reputation than I do myself. Everybody does.

MISS MIMMS. Not at all.

MRS. WESTLAKE. What a charming frock you're wearing.

MISS MIMMS. This? I don't think so. I'm the local commandant of the Girl Guides, and we don't go in for charm. Our ideal is useful service.

MRS. WESTLAKE. How nice for you. And what is your name?

MISS MIMMS. Mimms!

MRS. WESTLAKE. I don't mean the one you can't help having, but the one you get as a Girl Guide. I once knew a man who was a Boy Scout, and his name was Sitting Bull. I wondered if you had such a name in your Society. I think it would be very interesting to be called "Sitting Bull," but of course that wouldn't suit you, would it?

MISS MIMMS. No, not quite. We don't have such names in the Girl Guides.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I think that's a pity. Oh, I think that's a pity. How nice it would be for you, if you were called "Laughing Water"!

MISS MIMMS. I don't think it would be nice at all. I think it would be exceedingly ridiculous. There's nothing laughable about me. But I mustn't detain you, so I'll come to the point at once. I've really come to see you, Mrs. Westlake.

MRS. WESTLAKE. That's very sweet of you!

MISS MIMMS. I want you to do me a favour!

MRS. WESTLAKE (*a little dashed*). Oh!

MISS MIMMS. We're giving a little entertainment to-night for the Brownies! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. The what?

MISS MIMMS. The Brownies. The younger children who are not old enough to be admitted into the Girl Guides.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, I see. I'd not heard of Brownies in that connection before. I was thinking of those funny little creatures with beards who sit on toadstools and turn the milk sour.

MISS MIMMS. No, we're not a bit like that. I thought it would be a good idea if so well-known a person as yourself were to take the chair for us at the entertainment.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, no, I couldn't. I should feel

shy among all those Brownies, and I have a strong objection to publicity of any sort.

MISS MIMMS. The notice is short, of course, but I dare say in your profession you're used to that. It must be a very precarious occupation.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh very! Very! I've often wondered where my next part was coming from.

MISS MIMMS. I hope you'll come to-night?

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'll ask Chim to go.

MISS MIMMS. Chim!

MRS. WESTLAKE. He's my manager, and a strong supporter of the Girl Guides. He's very patriotic, and would do anything for the Empire. I've often heard him saying that if it were not for the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides, he would despair of England.

[*The door opens, and* HOBBS, CANON CONSIDINE *and* GEOFFREY *enter in that order.*]

MISS MIMMS (*as they enter*). Mr. Chim seems to have a high sense of duty!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, yes, he has! (*To* HOBBS.) Haven't you Chim?

HOBBS (*immediately suspicious*). Haven't I what?

MRS. WESTLAKE. A high sense of duty!

[CANON CONSIDINE *and* GEOFFREY *are greeting* MISS MIMMS.]

HOBBS. Why, what's wrong?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Miss Mimms—Oh, let me introduce you, Chim! Miss Mimms, this is my manager.

MISS MIMMS } (*simultaneously*). How do do?
HOBBS }

MRS. WESTLAKE. Miss Mimms is a Brownie!

MISS MIMMS. Oh, no; a Girl Guide!

MRS. WESTLAKE. I beg your pardon! (*To* HOBBS.) She's a Girl Guide!

HOBBS. Oh! I thought the War 'ad broke out again. Well, it's a very good work, Miss Mimms! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. I knew you'd appreciate it, Chim, so I said you'd take the chair to-night at the entertainment in the Scouts' Hall.

HOBBS. You said I'd do *what*?

MRS. WESTLAKE. I don't quite know what it is, but

I think it's to reform something, and I promised you'd do it.

HOBBS. Look 'ere! . . .

MISS MIMMS. It's very kind of you, Mr. Chim! . . .

HOBBS. No, no, not Chim! 'Obbs!

MISS MIMMS. I beg your pardon, Mr. 'Obbs!

HOBBS. No, not 'Obbs. *'Obbs!*

MISS MIMMS (*enlightened*). Oh, I see! Hobbs!

HOBBS. That's right. (*To* MRS. WESTLAKE.) I wish you wouldn't call me "Chim" in public. It misleads people!

MISS MIMMS. Well, Mr. Hobbs, I'm a strong believer in the need for brightening village life. That's why I'm here! Ten years ago I came to the conclusion that what was wrong with England was that village life was not bright enough, so I left my home in Tunbridge Wells . . . threw up everything . . . and came here. I am happy to say that my labours have not been unfruitful.

CANON CONSIDINE. I'm sure we are all sensible of the debt we owe you, Miss Mimms.

MISS MIMMS. That's a great comfort, Canon, a great comfort. (*To* HOBBS.) Do you know that when I came here ten years ago, there was not a single gramophone in the village? And now there are twenty-five.

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes . . . yes, that's quite true!

MISS MIMMS (*to* HOBBS). You've no idea of the change they've made in the village. One of the fishermen, Tom Smith, used to go to the public-house and get drunk every night. Now, he stays at home and plays the gramophone. Isn't that so, Canon?

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes! Oh, yes! I have heard that his neighbours wish he would take to drink again!

MISS MIMMS. Jealousy! That's all! I'm glad to find a kindred spirit in you, Mr. Hobbs.

HOBBS. Oh!

MISS MIMMS. Mrs. Westlake tells me that you take a great interest in the Empire! . . .

HOBBS. I dare say, but what's all this leading up to?

MISS MIMMS. I'm very grateful to you for consenting to take the chair to-night at the Girl Guides' Concert.

HOBBS. But I've never 'ad anything to do with Girl Guides.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, now's the time to begin. When do you want him, Miss Mimms?

MISS MIMMS. In three-quarters of an hour! We hold an ambulance class first! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. I think he ought tc go to that. Think how useful it would be, Chim, if you were to break your leg and knew how to bandage it.

HOBBS. I'm not in the 'abit of breaking my leg!

MISS MIMMS. Perhaps the rest of you will come, too!

[*Polite murmurs of more or less affected jollity.*

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, they'll all go. You, Canon, and all of you, you'll go and help Miss Mimms to brighten the village. You can't expect Chim to do it by himself.

HOBBS. No, I shouldn't think so I'm not used to this sort of thing, and I don't much like it.

MISS MIMMS. Well, then, I'll see you later, so I won't say "Good night" but "*Au revoir*"!

CANON CONSIDINE. I'll just come and see you to the door, Miss Mimms.

MISS MIMMS. Not at all, Canon! I know my way about!

CANON CONSIDINE. But I'd just like to see you safely out! . . .

[*He and she go out as he says this.*

HOBBS (*when the door is shut*). Look 'ere! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. How vital she is! I have never met anyone so vital as Miss Mimms!

HOBBS. I don't care about 'er vitality! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Look how she persuaded you to go to her entertainment.

HOBBS. I wasn't persuaded. I was 'umbugged into it by you. I've a good mind not to go.

MRS. WESTLAKE. You must go. It's no good cutting off your nose to spite somebody else's face. And I dare say Mr. Tom Smith will let you play his gramophone.

GEOFFREY (*to* MRS. WESTLAKE). I hope this entertainment isn't going to bore you.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'm not going

HOBBS. But you said you were! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. No, I said you were, all of you, but I didn't say I was. I'm going out in a boat with Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY. With me!

MRS CONSIDINE. It's rather late for boating.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, no! There's a moon, isn't there? (*To* GEOFFREY.) Of course, if you don't wish to take me! . . .

GEOFFREY. But I do . . . only that was the first I'd heard of the idea.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, there has to be a first time of hearing everything. I couldn't tell you before because Chim was so full of his Girl Guides!

HOBBS. They aren't my Girl Guides! What you want to go out in a boat for when you don't need to?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, there's a sea about, and I might as well go on it, especially when you're all going to leave me alone.

HOBBS. 'Oo's leaving you alone?

MRS. WESTLAKE. I heard you making arrangements with Miss Mimms—you seem very fond of Miss Mimms, Chim!—— (HOBBS *tries to speak but she talks him down.*) I heard you making arrangements to leave me here by myself! . . .

HOBBS (*explosively*). I never! . . . (*To the others.*) I appeal to you all! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. You asked all of them to go . . . except *me*!

HOBBS. I never said one word! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, then, she did. *Somebody* did! I felt quite hurt about it, but I didn't show that I was hurt.

HOBBS. No, you didn't.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I just said to myself, "Well, if they're going to neglect me like this, I shall go out in a boat . . . a *little* boat . . . with Geoffrey, and think of Joan of Arc!"

HOBBS. I give it up. I came into this room not two minutes ago, never 'avin' 'eard of Miss Mimms, and now I'm 'er bosom friend and a leader of the Girl Guides. Why didn't she stay in Tunbridge Wells and brighten that up a bit?

[*Enter* CANON CONSIDINE *again.*

CANON CONSIDINE. Remarkable woman, Miss Mimms! Yes, very remarkable! A little exhausting, perhaps, but full of energy . . . full of energy!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Where is Sir Henry?

CANON CONSIDINE. He went into the garden to meditate! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. I should like to do that.

CANON CONSIDINE. Well, why not? The night is quite warm, and the moon is shining very prettily on the sea! . . . (MRS. WESTLAKE *has risen and taken his arm, and as he speaks they move towards the French windows.*)

MRS. WESTLAKE (*reciting*). . . . Look how the floor of heaven is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold. . . .

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, quite so! Remarkable poet, Shakespeare was!

[*They go out together.*

HOBBS. She's very intense to-night, very intense!

MRS. CONSIDINE. Is that her normal way of behaving, Mr. Hobbs?

HOBBS. Oh, yes! You know, if she was to behave in what we call a natural manner, people 'ud say she was putting it on.

MRS. CONSIDINE. She seems to like your play, Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY. Yes, I think she does. What do you think of it, Hobbs?

HOBBS. Well, it's 'ard to say! It might be a success if you were to alter it a bit.

GEOFFREY. Alter it!

HOBBS. What the public wants nowadays is excitement. Anything with a lot of blood and torture in it! Now, if you were to cut out all the poetry and put in a lot more torture, I should say your play 'ud be a success.

MRS. CONSIDINE. I'm afraid you're a cynic, Mr. Hobbs.

HOBBS. No, I'm a business man. I've a play now—I didn't write it myself, mind you—Beeby wrote it—— (*To* GEOFFREY.) You know Beeby! . . .

GEOFFREY. Yes. He writes the worst plays in the world.

HOBBS. That's all very fine. They may be rotten, but they're successful, and that's the principal thing. Now, 'e's written a play that would suit 'er down to the ground, but she won't look at it.

GEOFFREY. She told me about it. It sounds terrible. All about a baboon.

MRS. CONSIDINE. A baboon!

HOBBS. Yes, that's it. I tell you that's a play! You listen to the plot, and then tell me if it isn't a winner. The 'eroine—that's 'er part—is a girl that gets cast away on an island in the Pacific! See? In nothing but 'er evening dress. The island is unin'abited except for one man 'ose never seen a woman before. 'E's really a white man, see, but 'e thinks 'e's a baboon! . . .

MRS. CONSIDINE. What a curious delusion, Mr. Hobbs!

HOBBS. No, not when you understand the facts of the case. You see, 'e was shipwrecked, too, when 'e was a baby, an' washed ashore on this island, where 'e was adopted by a female baboon that 'ud lost her offspring. An' 'e grew up there, leadin' a wild life . . . you know, climbin' trees just like a monkey, an' livin' on coco-nuts an' bananas . . . until 'e sees 'er, an' then e begins to feel the call of civilization.

GEOFFREY. What a play!

HOBBS. I'll bet you anything you like the flappers'll stand ten deep to see it. Of course, we'd 'ave to 'ave a professional acrobat for the baboon.

MRS. CONSIDINE. I don't think I'd like a baboon for my fiancé!

HOBBS. Well, it 'ud be a bit of a novelty any'ow. You know, you don't realize the dullness of young women's lives nowadays . . . going up to the City every day in the underground railway, typing the same dull letters week after week, and being followed about by the same dull clerks 'til they marry one out of sheer desperation—well, I mean to say it brings a little colour and excitement into their lives to see a play by Beeby.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Shall we go and join the others in the garden?

HOBBS. I think I'll just go upstairs and collect my thoughts a bit. I've got to make a speech about the Girl Guides to-night. I wouldn't like to put my foot in it, but that's about what I'm going to do.

MRS. CONSIDINE. I'm sure you'll make a very good speech. (GEOFFREY *goes out.*) Sheila!

SHEILA. Presently, Auntie!

MRS. CONSIDINE. Very well, my dear. (*She goes into the garden.*)

[SHEILA *sounds a note or two on the piano, and* HOBBS *goes to the door leading to the rest of the house. He opens it and is about to pass out, when* SHEILA *calls to him.*]

SHEILA. Mr. Hobbs!

HOBBS. Yes, Miss Considine?

SHEILA. I want to ask you a few questions.

HOBBS. Oh! Now?

SHEILA. Yes, please. I won't keep you long.

HOBBS (*shutting the door and returning to his seat*). Very well! Fire away!

SHEILA. Will you promise to answer my questions?

HOBBS. I'll answer anything in reason.

SHEILA. Has Mrs. Westlake ever been in love before?

HOBBS. Why? Is she in love now?

SHEILA. I don't know. I want to find out. Has she?

HOBBS. Of course, she 'as! A woman with 'er powers of expression is never out of love.

SHEILA. Has she always loved the same person?

HOBBS. I didn't say that. I said she'd never been out of love.

SHEILA. Do you think she'd make a man happy?

HOBBS. No, I don't. I know she wouldn't.

SHEILA. Are you her husband?

HOBBS. Good 'eavens, no! She 'asn't got a 'usband.

SHEILA. Has she ever had one?

HOBBS. Oh, yes. All actresses 'ave a 'usband some time or other. 'Er 'usband's dead.

SHEILA (*perfunctorily*). Oh, how dreadful!

HOBBS. I don't know so much. It was a 'appy release, from all I can 'ear! It's a bit strenuous living with Mrs. Westlake.

SHEILA (*pouncing on him, so to speak*). How do you know?

HOBBS. 'Ow do I know! . . . (*Then, as he realizes her suggestion, in an angry tone.*) Now, look 'ere, Miss Considine, I didn't come 'ere to discuss the passion of love, but the finance of the drama. See? Don't you go and make no mistake about Mrs. Westlake and me. I'm 'er business manager, not 'er inamorator. See?

SHEILA. Mr. Hobbs, it isn't any good trying to impress

me with anger and indignation. I'm a modern girl, and I know something about life. My experience is that when people are very indignant, they are nearly always guilty.

HOBBS. Oh! Well, let me tell you that I'm indignant and innocent. See? I've a good mind to tell your uncle of you . . . a young girl like you putting nasty thoughts in a man's 'ead.

SHEILA (*realizing that she has put her foot in it*). I'm sorry, Mr. Hobbs! I didn't mean to be offensive, only I'm so unhappy! . . . (*Her voice falters and she does not finish her speech.*)

HOBBS (*overwhelmed at once by the sight of her tears*). Oh! What are you un'appy about?

SHEILA. Mr. Hobbs, are you my friend?

HOBBS (*suspicious again*). Well, I don't know! I'd like to know what you want me to be your friend for first! The last time a young lady made that remark to me, I 'ad to get my wife to speak to 'er.

SHEILA. I mean—Oh, Mr. Hobbs, I'm going to trust you!

HOBBS. Well, don't trust me too much. I'm not asking for your confidence, you know!

SHEILA. I'm in love with Geoffrey.

HOBBS. Very nice, too!

SHEILA. But I'm afraid he's becoming infatuated with Mrs. Westlake.

HOBBS (*illuminated*). Oh—h—h—h! I see! You're jealous of 'er?

SHEILA. Yes.

HOBBS. And like a really nice woman you try to blacken 'er character.

SHEILA (*blubbering again*). I didn't mean to be unkind, but I must fight for my own, mustn't I? If you'd ever been in love, you'd know how unscrupulous it makes you.

HOBBS. I'm in love with my wife. That astonishes you, doesn't it? Quite a lot of people love their wives, you know, though I don't suppose any modern girl'd believe it.

SHEILA. Well, we haven't had much cause to believe it, have we?

HOBBS. I don't like to 'ear you talking like that. I'm

old-fashioned, I am, and I like to think of young girls 'avin' young minds. If you didn't read so much about life, Miss Considine, you'd know a lot more about it. Now, take my advice, whatever else you do, don't let Mrs. Westlake see you're jealous of 'er. It'll be like fuel to the fire, if you do. I don't suppose for a minute that she's in love with 'im! . . .

SHEILA. I saw her kissing him!

HOBBS. Oh, kissing! That's nothing! It's only an 'abit!

SHEILA. Well, what am I to do? I'm sure he's falling in love with her. He's hardly taken any notice of me since she arrived, and before she came he used to talk to me quite often.

HOBBS. Don't do anything! I've known Mary Westlake for years, and I tell you, Miss Considine, that I've only kept my sanity by pretending that she didn't really exist. She drove two managers into an early grave because they let themselves be upset by her. I said to myself, when I became 'er manager, "Albert," I said . . . that's my name, Albert . . . I was christened after the Prince Consort . . . Albert the Good . . . "Albert," I said, "if you don't fancy an early grave, you'll treat that woman as a woman ought to be treated . . . pretend she isn't there!" She don't want your young man, but she'd like you to think she does. Now, if you don't mind, I'll just go and think out a few elevating remarks for the Girl Guides.

SHEILA. Thank you, Mr. Hobbs.

HOBBS (*shaking her hand*). Cheer up! And believe me, you don't really know any more about life than your grandmother did. You'll learn a lot about it when you realize that. *Au revoir!*

[*He goes out.* SHEILA *goes back to the piano, and after a moment or two of thought, begins to strum on it.* GEOFFREY *comes in from the garden.*]

GEOFFREY. I say, Sheila, aren't you coming out?

SHEILA (*instantly happy*). Do you want me, Geoffrey?

GEOFFREY. Of course, I do. What a question to ask! We all want you. Mrs. Westlake sent me in to fetch you! . . .

SHEILA (*instantly downcast*). Oh! You only came because she sent you!

GEOFFREY. My dear Sheila, don't be silly!

SHEILA. I'm not silly, but I don't choose to be neglected just because a middle-aged actress makes eyes at you.

GEOFFREY. What on earth's the matter with you!

SHEILA. You know perfectly well! . . .

GEOFFREY. I know that you're very sulky! . . .

SHEILA. I'm not sulky!

GEOFFREY (*being very firm with her*). Excuse me, Sheila, but you are. However, I don't propose to take any notice of your sulks! . . .

SHEILA. Oh! Indeed!

GEOFFREY. Are you coming out?

SHEILA. No, thanks!

GEOFFREY. Very well, then! (*He goes towards the windows. Then he hesitates and returns to* SHEILA.) What's the matter, Sheila?

SHEILA. Nothing! Why?

GEOFFREY. You're not being very agreeable! . . .

SHEILA. Does that matter? You've had Mrs. Westlake to be agreeable to you all afternoon and evening, and presently you'll be going out in the boat with her. You've hardly spoken to me since she arrived! . . .

GEOFFREY. Oh, come, Sheila! . . .

SHEILA. Not that I care, of course! Not in the least!

GEOFFREY. Well, then, why make all this shindy?

[SHEILA *does not answer. She plays a few bars instead.*

GEOFFREY (*exasperated*). Are you coming or are you not?

SHEILA. No.

GEOFFREY. Very well. I shan't ask you again.

SHEILA. Of course, after that, I shall simply wither away!

GEOFFREY. My dear Sheila, when you are older and have more experience of life, you will realize that sarcasm is very unsuitable to women. (*While he is speaking* MRS. WESTLAKE *is seen in the garden, approaching the windows.*) I don't know what Mrs. Westlake will think of your ridiculous behaviour! . . .

[MRS. WESTLAKE *reaches the windows just as* SHEILA *makes the next speech. She stops and listens, her expression varying as the speech proceeds.*]

SHEILA. I don't care what Mrs. Westlake thinks of me! I take no interest in her. She's simply an elderly, ogling, self-indulgent, out-of-date actress who can't help splashing her sex about as if she were distributing hand-bills. She's just amusing herself with you, and, of course, you being a conceited young idiot, she takes you in.

GEOFFREY. Sheila!

SHEILA. But she couldn't take Uncle Henry in. He's a man of the world, not an over-grown infant prodigy! (*A fierce little twirl on the piano completely drowns an angry exclamation from* GEOFFREY.) He wouldn't even come in to the drawing-room after dinner, but went for a walk by himself, but you . . . of course you had to come and slop over her. And let me tell you this, Geoffrey, you can say what you like, but she *is* middle-aged! She wouldn't be running after you if she weren't.

GEOFFREY. She's not running after me

SHEILA. Well, you're running after her, then, and she's letting you. It's the same thing.

GEOFFREY (*with a terrific effort*). Have you anything else to say?

SHEILA. No. That's all at present. And now you can go and do your moonlight paddling with her.

[MRS. WESTLAKE *enters. She has recovered from the dismay into which she was thrown by* SHEILA'S *first speech, and she enters very gaily, as if she hadn't heard a word.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE. What a long time you've been, Geoffrey! Is it so hard to tear yourself away from Sheila? (SHEILA, *who has been playing steadily since her outburst, now strikes a wrong note.*) Oh, you've struck a wrong note.

GEOFFREY. Not the first one, either!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Isn't it? Oh, I'm sure that's not true! Your playing sounded very pleasant from the garden, Sheila. (*To* GEOFFREY.) I just came to tell you that Sir Henry has asked me to go out in the boat with him, and I wondered whether you'd mind! . . .

GEOFFREY. Yes, I do mind . . . very much! I think it's cheek on his part to ask you when he knows you've arranged to go out with me, and I shall tell him so! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, but you mustn't quarrel over me.

Besides, he didn't quite ask me, but I thought he perhaps might like to! . . .

GEOFFREY. Well, he can't. If you'll just go and get a warm wrap, I'll go down to the beach and get the boat ready.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Very well! I don't want to upset anybody's plans. I only wish to please everybody.

GEOFFREY. It can't be done. Don't be long. (*Exit.*)

MRS. WESTLAKE. Why didn't you come out and join us, Sheila?

SHEILA. I didn't want to.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, of course, that's a very good reason. What a nice man your Uncle Henry is!

SHEILA. Do you think so?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes! Don't you?

SHEILA. Oh, he's all right . . . for an uncle.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'm sure he'd be equally nice for a husband.

SHEILA (*interested*). Do you?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes. I must go and get my wrap. (*She goes towards the door, which she opens. She pauses for a moment.*) Oh, by the way, Sheila, I may be an actress, but I'm not middle-aged.

SHEILA. Mrs. Westlake!!!

MRS. WESTLAKE. I overheard everything. I always listen! (*She goes out, shutting the door behind her.*)

[SHEILA *stands gaping after her in a state of mingled dismay and astonishment.* SIR HENRY CONSIDINE *enters.*]

SIR HENRY. I say! . . . (*To* SHEILA.) Where's Mrs. Westlake?

SHEILA. Gone to get a wrap.

SIR HENRY. What's this about my going out in a boat with her?

SHEILA. Aren't you?

SIR HENRY. The first I heard of it was when Geoffrey came and told me I couldn't.

SHEILA. Uncle Henry, do go with her. I'm sure she's fond of you.

SIR HENRY. Fond of me! Why should she be?

SHEILA. I don't know, but she's just told me that you're the most interesting man she's ever known.

SIR HENRY. Oh!

SHEILA. She said she'd learnt more from listening to you for five minutes than she'd ever learned from anyone else in her life. That shows, doesn't it?

SIR HENRY. Well, I certainly have considerable powers of explicit statement! . . .

SHEILA. That's what she said. You make everything so clear.

SIR HENRY. And yet I thought she was less interested in the state of Andabar than she ought to have been. Evidently, I was wrong.

SHEILA. You're too modest, Uncle Henry. You don't realize how very interesting you are. And attractive.

SIR HENRY. Oh, I don't know.

SHEILA. Geoffrey's gone down to the beach to get the boat ready, and then he's coming back for her! Why don't you and she go out by the front way, while he comes up by the back? She'd much rather go with you. I'm sure she would. After all, you're a man, and he's only a boy!

SIR HENRY. That's quite true! But rowing about on the sea at this time of night doesn't agree with me! . . .

SHEILA. Please, Uncle Henry. For my sake! . . .

SIR HENRY. Oh! You only want me to take her out so that you can rescue Geoffrey from her!

SHEILA. No, Uncle Henry, not altogether. I want her to enjoy herself, and I'm sure she'll be happier on the sea with you than with Geoffrey. And when he sees that she's more interested in you . . . quite naturally, of course . . . then he won't be so keen on her.

SIR HENRY. Yes . . . there's something in that.

SHEILA. I'm terribly fond of Geoffrey, Uncle Henry, and I don't want him to slip through my fingers.

SIR HENRY. What a very unromantic way to put it, Sheila!

SHEILA. We haven't time to be romantic nowadays, Uncle. I'm in love with Geoffrey . . . I don't care who knows it . . . and I shall marry him by hook or by crook.

SIR HENRY. But does he love you?

SHEILA. It's enough for me that I love him, but even if I didn't, I'm not going to be a superfluous woman if

I can help it. You will take her out in the boat, Uncle Henry, won't you?

SIR HENRY. Well, I'll see.

[*The door opens and* MRS. WESTLAKE, *wearing a warm wrap, returns.* SHEILA *immediately goes into the garden.*]

SIR HENRY. Ah, Mrs. Westlake!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Ah, Sir Henry!

SIR HENRY. It's been very charming to have you here with us.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I believe you're going to make love to me.

SIR HENRY (*immediately nonplussed*). My dear Mrs. Westlake! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. You may call me "Mary."

SIR HENRY. But, my dear lady! . . . I must have expressed myself very crudely. I . . . I hardly thought! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Don't you like me, then?

SIR HENRY. Of course, I . . . I like you. I can hardly help it, can I? . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, please don't be diplomatic, Sir Henry. Be a plain, blunt man for once, and admit that you are going to make love to me.

SIR HENRY. I . . . I hardly know what to say. I must admit that I'm not insensible to your attractive qualities, Mrs. Westlake! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. I think that's such a nice way to put it. I'm afraid your sense of finesse, Sir Henry, must make me seem a very crude, impulsive woman! . . .

SIR HENRY. Oh, not at all! I sometimes think that my diplomatic training may have made me a trifle hypercritical! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. No, it could never do that! What I admire so much in you is your self-control. You're so imperturbable, calm! I understand the works of Kipling far better now that I know you! . . .

SIR HENRY (*very pleased*). You know, you're flattering me! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, no, I'm not. You don't realize how splendid it is for a woman like me to have a friend like you. You are my friend, aren't you? . . .

SIR HENRY. I'm proud to think that you wish me to be.

MRS. WESTLAKE. You're so sure of yourself that I feel I could depend upon you in any trouble or misfortune for advice.

SIR HENRY. I had no idea you felt for me like this. I thought you were rather smitten by my nephew, Geoffrey!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Geoffrey is a very nice boy . . . but only a boy!

SIR HENRY. Yes, yes . . . of course. He's young and crude! I quite understand.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Every woman feels attracted by youth, Sir Henry, but in time of trouble she needs the comfort and support of a strong man, one who understands the world and can sympathize with her sorrows! . . .

SIR HENRY. Are you in trouble, Mrs. Westlake?

MRS. WESTLAKE. I am always in trouble! . . .

SIR HENRY. Let me help you!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, I couldn't. My pride prevents me. I'm very proud, Sir Henry. If I could only tell you all that I have endured in my life! . . .

SIR HENRY. Tell me everything. Pour it all out! (*The sound of voices is heard in the garden.*) Damn! I think they're coming in. Can't we meet somewhere? I won't go to the concert! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. But I am going out with Geoffrey!

SIR HENRY. Don't go!

MRS WESTLAKE. But I want to go out on the sea in a little boat.

SIR HENRY. I've a good mind to come, too! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Geoffrey will be there!

SIR HENRY. Couldn't we give him the slip?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, Sir Henry!

SIR HENRY. What's to prevent us from going out this way (*to the door*) while they come in that. (*Pointing to the windows.*) Then we'll go down to the beach and push off.

MRS. WESTLAKE. How resourceful you are!

SIR HENRY. Oh, that's nothing! Will you come?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, I'll go anywhere with you!

SIR HENRY. Then come along!

[*They go towards the door. As they approach it, the sound of voices in the garden grows louder. The door opens, and* HOBBS, *overcoated and muffled, appears.*]

HOBBS. 'Ullo, where are you two off to?

SIR HENRY. Mrs. Westlake and I are going on ahead, Hobbs. Just tell the others, will you?

[MRS. WESTLAKE *and* SIR HENRY *go out, closing the door behind them.*]

HOBBS (*alone*). Now I wonder what the 'ell she's up to?

[*Enter* CANON CONSIDINE, *followed by* MRS. CONSIDINE *and* SHEILA.]

CANON CONSIDINE. Ah, you're ready, Mr. Hobbs. We won't be a second. Have you seen my brother? He ought to be getting ready, too!

HOBBS. 'E told me to tell you 'e'd gone on a'ead!

MRS. CONSIDINE. Gone on ahead! By himself?

HOBBS. No, 'e'd got Mrs. Westlake with 'im.

MRS. CONSIDINE. But Mrs. Westlake isn't going to the concert.

HOBBS. No, no more she isn't. Perhaps 'e's taking 'er down to the boat, and 'e'll come on afterwards.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Perhaps! Come along, Sheila, we must get ready.

[*She goes out by the door.*

SHEILA (*to* HOBBS). Did they say where they were going?

HOBBS. They said they were going on a'ead, and they asked me to tell you. That's all I know.

SHEILA (*sailing out of the room with immense satisfaction*). Good! Good!!

CANON CONSIDINE (*when she has gone*). Now, why did she say "Good!" like that?

HOBBS. I don't know, and I've made it a principle in life not to waste time trying to understand what any woman means when she says "Good!" like that.

[*Enter* GEOFFREY.

GEOFFREY. Hullo, haven't you all gone yet? You'll be late.

CANON CONSIDINE. We're just off, my boy.

GEOFFREY. Where's Mrs. Westlake?

HOBBS. She's gone off with your Uncle 'Enry!

GEOFFREY. Gone off with Uncle Henry!

HOBBS. Yes, and it's about time we were off, too.

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes. I'll just go and put my coat on! [*Exit.*

GEOFFREY. I say, Hobbs, what did you mean when you said Mrs. Westlake had gone off with my uncle?

HOBBS. Exactly what I said. They've gone off together.

[*The* MAID *enters.*

MAID. They're waiting for you, sir!

HOBBS. Oh, yes!

GEOFFREY. Jenny, have you seen Mrs. Westlake and Sir Henry?

MAID. Yes, sir, they went down to the beach together and went off in the boat.

HOBBS. Went off in the boat!

MAID. Yes, sir.

GEOFFREY. Thank you, Jenny.

[*Exit* MAID.

HOBBS. I thought she was going out with you!

GEOFFREY. So did I.

HOBBS. Well, she seems to 'ave changed 'er mind. You'd better come along with us, and 'ave a pleasant evening with the Girl Guides.

GEOFFREY. No, thanks! I'll . . . I'll stay here.

HOBBS. Just as you please. It'll probably be more amusing. (*He goes to the door.*) Good night!

GEOFFREY. Good night!

[*Exit* HOBBS.

[GEOFFREY *stands irresolute for a moment. Then he goes to the window and looks out. He returns to the centre of the room and throws himself in a chair.*]

GEOFFREY. Damn Uncle Henry!

THE THIRD ACT

The time is the next morning, Saturday, before breakfast, and the scene is again the drawing-room. CANON CONSIDINE *is outside the window, reading the morning paper.* GEOFFREY *enters by the door. He has a discontented look on his face, and he moves about the room in a restless fashion.* CANON CONSIDINE *turns and sees him.*

CANON CONSIDINE (*entering*). Ah, Geoffrey! Good morning!

GEOFFREY. Good morning, father!

CANON CONSIDINE. Have you seen your Uncle Henry?

GEOFFREY. No, but I very much want to. I shall have something to say to him when I do see him.

CANON CONSIDINE. Mmmm! Not quite your customary genial self this morning, my boy!

GEOFFREY. Well, don't you think he behaved very badly last night—sneaking off with Mrs. Westlake when she'd promised to go out with me?

CANON CONSIDINE. I'm not an authority on these matters, Geoffrey, although in my youth I had as much dash in me as anyone. At what time did they get back?

GEOFFREY. I don't know. I was so fed up with their behaviour that I simply went to bed. What was Hobbs's speech like?

CANON CONSIDINE. Oh, my dear boy, deplorable! He addressed the Girl Guides as if they were members of a Masonic Society. Miss Mimms seemed to like it. She said his speech was breezy. I am inclined to think that there is more beneath the surface of Miss Mimms than either you or I suspect. (*Enter the* MAID.) Oh, Jenny, do you know at what time Mrs. Westlake and Sir Henry came home last night?

MAID. They didn't come home, sir!

GEOFFREY. } What!

CANON CONSIDINE. } They didn't come home!

MAID. They weren't in their rooms when I took the hot water this morning!

GEOFFREY. I say, father! . . .

CANON CONSIDINE. I expect they got up early and went for a walk.

GEOFFREY. I don't think Mrs. Westlake ever gets up early, and I'm sure she doesn't care for walks.

MAID. The beds weren't slept in, sir!

CANON CONSIDINE. Then they must have been out all night!

MAID. Yes, sir. [*Exit* MAID.

GEOFFREY. Good heavens, I hope they haven't had an accident!

CANON CONSIDINE. Well, I'm inclined to hope that they have. There's no other excuse for them.

GEOFFREY. We must get up a search party at once! . . . (*Enter* HOBBS.) Oh, Hobbs, Mrs. Westlake's been out all night!

HOBBS. That doesn't surprise me!

GEOFFREY. This isn't a time for fooling! My uncle was with her.

HOBBS. I guessed that. She isn't likely to be out all night by 'erself.

GEOFFREY. But don't you understand, man?—they may have been drowned.

HOBBS. Oh, no! Not Mary Westlake!

CANON CONSIDINE. You may be quite right about Mrs. Westlake, Mr. Hobbs, but I'm not so sure about my brother. We'll have to make some inquiries. (*He goes to the door and peers into the passage.* SHEILA *is there.*) Ah, Sheila, my dear! . . .

SHEILA (*heard off*). Yes, Uncle Peter!

CANON CONSIDINE. Just go and tell your aunt, will you, my dear, that Mrs. Westlake and your Uncle Henry have been out all night! . . .

SHEILA (*entering*). Both of them?

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, my dear, and together, instead of separately. Ask your aunt what we're to do about it.

SHEILA (*beaming with delight*). Oh, I will, Uncle, indeed I will. (*She goes out again gleefully.*)

CANON CONSIDINE. I'm afraid she hardly appreciates the gravity of the situation. It's so unlike Henry to do anything unusual.

HOBBS. I can't say the same for Mrs. Westlake.

GEOFFREY. Come along, Hobbs. Let's go down to the village! . . .

HOBBS. What about 'avin' breakfast first?

GEOFFREY (*passionately*). How can you stand there and talk about food when Mary may be floating about in the sea! . . .

HOBBS. No, I *don't* think so! Your Uncle Henry, per'aps! Mrs. Westlake, *no*!

CANON CONSIDINE. You don't know my brother, Mr. Hobbs.

HOBBS. No, but I know Mrs. Westlake! The Flood itself wouldn't a-drowned 'er!

GEOFFREY. Well, if they aren't drowned, where are they?

HOBBS. Somewhere they didn't ought to be.

[*Enter* MRS. CONSIDINE, *followed by* SHEILA.

MRS. CONSIDINE. What's this about Mrs. Westlake and Henry?

CANON CONSIDINE. They've been out all night, my dear! Geoffrey thinks they've had an accident . . . been drowned or . . . something like that . . . but Mr. Hobbs here is more optimistic!

HOBBS. I didn't say I was optimistic. I said I didn't believe Mrs. Westlake was drowned.

CANON CONSIDINE. Well, that's optimistic, isn't it?

HOBBS. It depends on your point of view.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Didn't they come back last night?

CANON CONSIDINE. Apparently not. We were so late in returning from the concert that I, like all of you, thought they'd gone to bed.

HOBBS. When I think of my speech, I almost wish I'd gone out in a boat and got lost, too!

GEOFFREY. I can't bear this suspense! How can you all stand there chattering when anything may have happened to her! . . .

CANON CONSIDINE. And equally, my boy, to your Uncle Henry!

GEOFFREY. I'm terribly anxious about her.

HOBBS. That's just what she'd like us all to be. It wouldn't surprise me if she worked the whole thing to upset us.

GEOFFREY. I hate to hear you talking like that, Hobbs They must have had an accident. No one could stay out all night with Uncle Henry on purpose.

HOBBS. Well, of course, you know your Uncle 'Enry better than I do.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Go down to the village at once, Geoffrey, and tell the fishermen what's happened.

GEOFFREY. Yes, mother! (*He goes out by the door.*)

MRS. CONSIDINE. Peter!

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, my dear!

MRS. CONSIDINE. You'd better go and tell the policeman! . . .

HOBBS. Oh, don't bring the police into it!

MRS. CONSIDINE. Go along, Peter!

CANON CONSIDINE. Very well, my dear! There hasn't been any crime in Hinton St. Henry during the whole period that I have been Vicar. I hope the policeman won't lose his head. Oh, my dear, ought I to mention the matter to Miss Mimms?

HOBBS. Well, pers'nally, I think she's the last person to mention anything to!

MRS. CONSIDINE. I think we'd better leave Miss Mimms out of it, Peter.

CANON CONSIDINE. That'll be very difficult, I'm afraid. However, we must just do our best. Are you coming, Hobbs?

HOBBS. I don't think it's necessary, you know! . . .

MRS. CONSIDINE. You don't seem very anxious about Mrs. Westlake!

HOBBS. I can't bring myself to believe anything's 'appened to 'er. It don't seem, some'ow, as if anything could 'appen to 'er.

CANON CONSIDINE. Well, of course, it's always desirable to put a brave face on things.

[SHEILA, *who has been standing at the window, utters an exclamation.*]

CANON CONSIDINE (*turning to her*). I beg your pardon!

SHEILA. Here they are! Coming up the back-way!

CANON CONSIDINE. Who, my dear?

SHEILA. Mrs. Westlake and Uncle Henry! They do look funny! (*She goes out into the garden to meet them.*)

CANON CONSIDINE. Then they aren't drowned!

HOBBS. I told you they weren't!

[MRS. WESTLAKE, *still wearing evening clothes, but covered in oilskins and wearing a sou'wester on her head, appears at the window.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, what a glorious night we've had!

HOBBS (*aside*). I thought as much!

[MRS. WESTLAKE *comes into the room.*

MRS. CONSIDINE. I'm afraid you must have had a dreadful experience!

MRS. WESTLAKE. No, it was wonderful. It was the greatest adventure I've ever had. But I'm afraid that poor Sir Henry didn't enjoy himself! (SIR HENRY, *whose evening suit is covered with oilskins, appears in the window. He takes off his sou'wester as he enters.*) Did you, Sir Henry?

SIR HENRY. What?

MRS. WESTLAKE. You were not quite so happy last night as I was, were you?

SIR HENRY (*gloomily*). Happy! (*With a gurgling laugh.*) Ha! Can I have a large, hot whisky, Peter?

[SHEILA *enters.*

CANON CONSIDINE. Certainly, Henry, certainly. (*He rings the bell.*)

SIR HENRY. And a hot bath?

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, you can have that, too. Can't he, my dear?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Oh, quite. Is that all you want, Henry?

SIR HENRY. No. I want to go to bed. What day's this?

SHEILA. Saturday!

SIR HENRY. Well, I think if I'm called on Tuesday morning that will be quite early enough!

[*Enter the* MAID.

CANON CONSIDINE. Oh, Jenny, bring a large, hot whisky for Sir Henry.

MAID. Yes, sir. (*Exit.*)

MRS. WESTLAKE. Sir Henry doesn't like the sea!

SIR HENRY. I like it in its proper place, which is not inside me. I seem to have swallowed half the contents of the ocean.

MRS. CONSIDINE. What on earth happened?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, I thought I'd like to row! . . .

SIR HENRY. That was the entire cause of the trouble. You can't row.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, yes, I can. I once rowed Chim on the Serpentine.

HOBBS. Yes, and I've never forgotten it. I gave myself up for lost that day!

MRS. WESTLAKE. But, of course, no one can row without oars!

CANON CONSIDINE. Without oars!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes. You see, I lost them! We were going along quite nicely, but when we got outside the bay, the sea became very boisterous, and I was so surprised at it, that I let the oars go overboard and they just drifted away, and we couldn't get them! (*The* MAID *enters with the hot whisky.*) Oh, thank you! (*She takes the whisky and drinks some of it.*) It's very nice, Sir Henry. You should have some.

SIR HENRY. But that was for me!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh! I'm so sorry! (*To the others.*) I've taken his whisky! You know, I'm like that. I always take things that are meant for other people.

MRS. CONSIDINE. You shall have some more, Henry.

SIR HENRY. I haven't had any yet.

MRS. CONSIDINE (*to the* MAID). Bring another glass for Sir Henry, Jenny.

MAID. Yes, ma'am. (*Exit.*)

CANON CONSIDINE. I'm afraid I still do not understand what happened last night.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I don't wonder. It's frightfully complicated. I don't mind for myself, of course. . . . I enjoyed it . . . but poor Sir Henry didn't like it at all.

SIR HENRY. No, I didn't. At my time of life, a man

does not get any pleasure out of all-night adventures on the ocean.

MRS. WESTLAKE. But, Sir Henry, I reminded you of the difference in our ages, and yet you went on making love to me! . . .

SIR HENRY (*rising*). I absolutely! . . . (*He becomes inarticulate with anger.*)

MRS. WESTLAKE. You know you did. I said: "No, Sir Henry, you are much older than I am, and it is quite impossible."

[*A swallowed grunt from* SIR HENRY.

CANON CONSIDINE. Henry, I do not wish to take advantage of my position as your elder brother, but I must say you have disappointed me! . . .

SIR HENRY. Have I! Have I, indeed! . . .

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes. I think that if you wished to stay out all night with a lady, you might have done it in another parish!

(*The* MAID *enters with the whisky.*

SIR HENRY. I . . . er . . . grrh! . . .

MAID. Whisky, sir!

[SIR HENRY *seizes the glass and gulps down a good deal of the whisky. The* MAID *retires.*]

CANON CONSIDINE. I am not a censorious man, as a rule! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'm sure you're not. You have such a kind face. (*He beams at her.*) I told Sir Henry there would be talk in the village, but I was sure you would be kind and understanding.

CANON CONSIDINE. Well . . . er . . . yes . . . er . . . I think I have a sympathetic disposition! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. You have. The moment the oars drifted away, I leant forward and I said to Sir Henry, "This is a very embarrassing situation. There will be talk about it all over the country, but Canon Considine will understand!" I'm sorry to say Sir Henry used very bad language! (*Gurgles from* SIR HENRY.) Hush, Sir Henry! (*To* CANON CONSIDINE.) I hardly like to repeat to you what he said! . . .

CANON CONSIDINE. Well, perhaps you'd better not try! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. He said . . . " Damn ! "

CANON CONSIDINE (*disappointed or relieved—one is not quite sure which*). Oh, well . . . well . . . er . . . perhaps the objurgation was excusable in the circumstances.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Do you think so ? (*Turning to* SIR HENRY.) Then, Sir Henry, I forgive you !

SIR HENRY. Thank you ! I might have used worse language and been excused. You almost pitched me into the sea. (*To the others.*) I was trying to recover the oars, and she upset the balance of the boat by getting up and declaiming at me. I've got rheumatism in my right shoulder, and I shouldn't be surprised if I ended up with double pneumonia.

SHEILA. But what happened after the oars were lost ? How did you get back to land ?

MRS. WESTLAKE. That was wonderful. We drifted about for a while, just drifting and drifting further away from land, and the little boat went up and down . . . like that, Chim ! . . . (*She makes an up-and-down motion with her hand.*)

HOBBS (*disgusted*). No, don't, don't ! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. And Sir Henry's language became very explicit. I suppose he thought he was back in Andabar ! . . .

SIR HENRY. I didn't think anything of the sort. I knew perfectly well where I was. Lost at sea . . . with you !

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, if you were lost at sea with me, I also was lost at sea with you, but I remembered that I was British, and I didn't give way. I said to myself, " Mary, whatever happens, be British ! " And I was. All the time that Sir Henry was swearing . . . horribly . . . I kept on saying, " I'm British, I'm British, I'm British ! " And that helped me wonderfully. People have had statues put up to them for less than that.

CANON CONSIDINE. But won't you please tell us ! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. It's very difficult to keep to the thread of the story if I'm interrupted every second. You all forget I've had a very agitatious night ! . . .

SHEILA. What sort of a night ?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Agitatious !

CANON CONSIDINE. There's no such word !

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, there is. I've just made it up. I had to support Sir Henry's courage, as well as my own! . . .

SIR HENRY. My courage does not require any support either from you or anybody else.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, Sir Henry! *Oh,* Sir Henry!! How can you say such a thing! I realized last night that you are not the kind of man on whom a woman can depend in the hour of danger, but I thought you told the truth! . . .

SIR HENRY. So I do!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Then you must admit that you were in a funk! . . .

SIR HENRY. If I was in a funk, which I deny, it was entirely on your account.

MRS. WESTLAKE. On my account! (*She rises and goes to him.*) Oh, how I've misjudged you! (*Pats his right shoulder.*)

SIR HENRY (*with a shout of pain.*) Don't touch me there! I told you I'd got rheumatism in my right shoulder.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'm so sorry. You poor thing! (*To the others.*) He's contracted rheumatism for my sake!

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, yes, but we still do not know how you got rescued.

MRS. WESTLAKE (*returning to her seat*). True! And it's my fault. I talk too much, and I always wander away from the point. An author once said to me that conversation should be like a ball which is tossed from one person to another . . . like this! . . . (*She takes up a cushion and throws it to* CANON CONSIDINE, *who only just catches it.*) But that isn't what I do! I toss the ball up and down . . . just like that! . . . (*She takes a smaller cushion and throws it into the air and catches it.*) And, of course, there isn't any conversation . . . just a monologue . . . and people get so annoyed about it. . . . (*To* MRS. CONSIDINE.) Do you think I might go to my room and change my clothes?

MRS. CONSIDINE. I'll come with you in case you need help.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Thank you. (*She goes towards the door.*) Sir Henry, I forgive you freely!

SIR HENRY. Thank you! Thank you very much!

MRS. WESTLAKE. But it must never happen again!

SIR HENRY. I'll take damned good care it doesn't!

MRS. WESTLAKE (*to* CANON CONSIDINE). You see, he's sorry. You'll forgive him, won't you?

CANON CONSIDINE. But we still do not know! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Sir Henry will tell you. He's very good at explanations! He told me a great deal about the history of marriage in Andabar—that was before I lost the oars! Such an interesting subject! (*She goes out, followed by* MRS. CONSIDINE.)

CANON CONSIDINE. What a very remarkable woman!

SHEILA (*impulsively to* SIR HENRY). Oh, thank you, thank you, Uncle Henry!

SIR HENRY. What on earth's the matter with you?

SHEILA. I know you did it all for my sake, and I'm very grateful to you.

CANON CONSIDINE. Did it all for your sake!

SIR HENRY. If you imagine I spent a miserable night on the sea for your benefit, Sheila, you're very much mistaken.

HOBBS. Then what did you do it for?

SIR HENRY. Do you think I did it on purpose, you fool?

HOBBS. 'Oo's a fool?

SIR HENRY. You are . . . asking such a damned silly question.

CANON CONSIDINE (*soothingly*). Henry! Henry!

SIR HENRY. You've been told by her herself that she lost the oars. I believe she lost 'em purposely. I'd believe anything of that woman. She spent half the night reviling me for losing her, and the other half telling me horrible stories of the tortures suffered by people who'd been lost at sea.

CANON CONSIDINE. Her conversation is certainly varied in character.

SIR HENRY. She told me a story about a girl, adrift on a raft in the Indian Ocean with ten men who became exceedingly thirsty and decided to kill her and drink her blood! . . .

HOBBS. She's got an imagination, you know! She's got an imagination!

CANON CONSIDINE. I should think so, too. Sheila, my dear, wouldn't you like to go into the garden? . . .

SHEILA. No, Uncle Peter, I wouldn't.

SIR HENRY. That was her idea of chatty conversation! After we'd been drifting about for what seemed hours, I saw one of our trawlers. I yelled to the fishermen and they took us aboard. They wanted to bring us ashore at once, but she said it would be wicked to interfere with the food supplies of the nation, and insisted on stopping out until they'd pulled their nets. Of course, *she* was all right! They made her as comfortable as they could and gave her a hot drink, but I got shoved into a corner with a lot of mackerel. I shall never be able to eat mackerel again. I'm covered with scales and I smell like a fishmonger. But the more uncomfortable I was the more cheerful she became, and at one period of the night she started to recite "The Ancient Mariner"!

CANON CONSIDINE. Well, all's well that ends well—if it has ended well. Of course, that remains to be seen.

[GEOFFREY *enters by the window.*

GEOFFREY. Ah, Uncle Henry!

SIR HENRY. Ah, Geoffrey!

GEOFFREY. I should like some explanation of your amazing behaviour last night. Are you aware that I had an appointment with Mrs. Westlake?

SIR HENRY. I am. And I'd like to know why the devil you don't keep your appointments!

GEOFFREY. Don't be brazen, Uncle Henry. I want an explanation from you.

SIR HENRY. Well, you won't get one.

GEOFFREY. You took Mrs. Westlake out last night and compromised her!

SIR HENRY. I did nothing of the kind. If anybody was compromised, it was me!

GEOFFREY. My standard of decent behaviour, Uncle Henry, seems to be different from yours. (*To* CANON CONSIDINE.) Father, a member of our family has placed Mrs. Westlake in an unfortunate position! . . .

CANON CONSIDINE. I agree, Geoffrey, that the position

is unfortunate, but I don't quite see what we can do about it.

GEOFFREY. Well, I can. One of us must offer to marry her.

OMNES. What! Good Heavens!

GEOFFREY. Either Uncle Henry! . . .

SIR HENRY. No! NO!!

GEOFFREY. Or I!

SHEILA. You! Why on earth should you marry her?

GEOFFREY. If Uncle Henry won't, I must. Somebody's got to do it. Father's out of the question.

CANON CONSIDINE (*nervously*). I hope so.

SHEILA. Uncle Henry, *you'll* have to marry her!

SIR HENRY. Why? It wasn't my fault she lost the oars!

SHEILA. You shouldn't have let her lose them. Any man who is a man can control a pair of oars.

HOBBS. 'Ere! 'Ere!! What's all this talk about 'er gettin' married? 'Oo's goin' to marry her? And why?

SHEILA. Uncle Henry is . . . because he kept her out all night!

HOBBS. Well, 'e couldn't 'elp it, could 'e?

SIR HENRY. That's what I've been telling them. The circumstances were entirely beyond my control, and I will *not* marry Mrs. Westlake. I've spent a very uncomfortable night on a heap of offensive fish, and I think I've done my bit.

SHEILA. But think of the publicity, Uncle Henry!

HOBBS. That's what *I'm* thinking of! It's the best piece of publicity I've ever 'eard of in the 'ole of my theatrical career.

SIR HENRY (*suspiciously*). What do you mean?

HOBBS. Why, this story'll be a magnificent advertisement.

SIR HENRY. WHAT!!

HOBBS. When I get back to town, I'll put **our** press agent on to it! . . .

SIR HENRY. Wait a minute. *Wait a minute!!* Are you proposing to publish this affair in the press?

HOBBS. Well, you don't think I'm going to waste it, do you? I thought she was up to something when she

took *you* out in a boat. 'Ave you got a photograph of yourself 'andy?

SIR HENRY. Now, look here, Mr. Hobbs! . . .

HOBBS. I've got an idea. 'Ow about 'avin' you and 'er photographed in your oilskins in the boat with the fishermen?

GEOFFREY. And the mackerel!

HOBBS (*quite seriously*). Yes. They could both be 'oldin' one up in their 'ands! That's a very good idea of yours, Considine! . . .

[*The* MAID *enters.*

MAID. Miss Mimms!

SIR HENRY (*collapsing*). My God!

[MISS MIMMS, *still in her Girl Guide uniform, enters. The* MAID *retires.*]

MISS MIMMS. Sir Henry, I'm so glad you haven't been drowned!

SIR HENRY. I'm beginning to wonder whether I am!

MISS MIMMS. The moment I heard the dreadful news I put on my uniform and mobilized the Girl Guides. They're outside now, waiting for orders.

SIR HENRY. For heaven's sake, demobilize them at once.

MISS MIMMS. Isn't there anything we can do for you?

SIR HENRY. Nothing . . . except go home.

MISS MIMMS. Ah, I wish we'd rescued you. It would have been such a feather in our cap. Can't we do something for Mrs. Westlake?

SIR HENRY. No one can do anything for Mrs. Westlake. No one!

MISS MIMMS. What a pity! We're just pining to do something for somebody. Oh, Mr. Hobbs! . . .

HOBBS (*shrinking from her*). No! No, you can't do anything for me!

MISS MIMMS. I want to thank you for the beautiful speech you made last night. The girls loved it!

HOBBS. Loved it!

MISS MIMMS. When you told them that they ought to be kind to their elders because they, too, would one day be old, you touched a chord in my heart, and I'm not ashamed to say I almost broke down.

HOBBS. Oh, I ope not.

MISS MIMMS. I just wanted to say "Thank you"!

HOBBS. Not at all. I'm always 'appy to oblige.

MISS MIMMS. I suppose I shall have to send the girls home. They'll be so disappointed. Isn't there anything we can do for some of you? (*Dead silence.*) Very well! But if Mrs. Westlake is ever in a similar position in this district, I hope she'll let us know. We'll do our best for her.

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, I'm sure you will. May I just see you out? . . .

MISS MIMMS. Oh, Mr. Hobbs, is it true that theatrical life is full of temptations?

HOBBS. No one's ever tried to tempt me!

MISS MIMMS. Never?

HOBBS. No.

MISS MIMMS. Then I have been cruelly misinformed. Good morning!

OMNES. Good morning!

[*She goes out, followed by* CANON CONSIDINE.

HOBBS. That woman's determined to rescue somebody from something!

SIR HENRY. Hobbs, before Miss Mimms came in, you expressed your intention of making a newspaper story out of my misadventure last night!

HOBBS. Yes, Sir 'Enry!

SIR HENRY. I warn you, Mr. Hobbs, that if you print one word of the affair, I will prosecute you.

HOBBS (*delighted*). Thank you, Sir 'Enry! I knew you wouldn't let me down! . . .

SIR HENRY. What do you mean?

HOBBS. Why, a prosecution'll just put the finishing touch to it. Thank you, Sir 'Enry!

SIR HENRY. Don't be an idiot!

GEOFFREY. There's a more important matter than that yet unsettled. Which of us is to marry Mrs. Westlake? You, Uncle Henry, or me?

HOBBS. No, no, no, don't start that again. We don't want a marriage: we want a stunt.

GEOFFREY. Uncle Henry?

SIR HENRY. I have contracted a rheumatic shoulder

for Mrs. Westlake's sake. I think my obligation to her ends there.

[*Re-enter* MRS. CONSIDINE.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Henry, your bath's ready!

SIR HENRY. Thank you, Mildred. Understand, Mr. Hobbs, I absolutely forbid you to make any mention of my name in the public press. (*Exit.*)

HOBBS. Now, that's what I call selfish.

CANON CONSIDINE. Perhaps you do not appreciate our desire for privacy! . . .

HOBBS. I do not.

CANON CONSIDINE Nevertheless, it is a real desire, and I must join my brother in asking you not to publish anything about this very unpleasant incident.

HOBBS. Flying in the face of Providence, that's what I call it.

CANON CONSIDINE. In my opinion, Mr. Hobbs, both as a priest and as a man, Providence had nothing whatever to do with it.

MRS. CONSIDINE. What's happened now?

CANON CONSIDINE. Mr. Hobbs wishes to put an account of last night's affair in the newspapers. Oh, and Geoffrey thinks that someone ought to marry Mrs. Westlake—either he or Henry!

HOBBS. Now, that's a silly stunt, if you like. The public don't take no interest in marriage, but if they only knew that Mrs. Westlake 'ad been out all night in a rowing boat with Sir 'Enry—well, our next production 'ud be a terrific success. Why, even Shakespeare 'ud be popular with an advertisement like that!

MRS. CONSIDINE. My dear Geoffrey, it isn't necessary for you to imitate your uncle in folly.

GEOFFREY. This is a matter of principle and honour! . . .

HOBBS. When people begin to talk like that, I know something awful's going to 'appen. You're 'appy 'ere, aren't you? What you want to go and ruin everything for?

GEOFFREY. I'm not thinking of happiness. I am thinking of the respect due to a lady.

SHEILA. Geoffrey, you're so middle class!

GEOFFREY. You said Mrs. Westlake was middle-aged.

Now you say I'm middle class. You seem to have a very middling sort of mind.

SHEILA. I don't suppose Mrs. Westlake will feel flattered when she hears you propose to marry her out of charity.

[*Enter* MRS. WESTLAKE, *now wearing a pretty morning frock.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE. What did you say?

GEOFFREY. Mrs. Westlake, will you marry me?

OMNES. Geoffrey! Good heavens!! My dear boy!

HOBBS. Look 'ere, look 'ere! . . .

GEOFFREY (*to* MARY). Will you marry me?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Chim, what have you been doing?

HOBBS. Me! Now, don't you go and blame me for this. I ain't done nothing.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, evidently something has happened since I left the room. People don't ask you to marry them just because they can't think of anything else to say.

HOBBS. Well, as far as I can make out, that's just what they do do. They've turned down a perfectly good publicity stunt, and now they want to work off this rotten proposal of marriage to save your reputation.

MRS. WESTLAKE. My reputation! Who's going to save it?

HOBBS (*pointing to* GEOFFREY). 'E wants to save you from 'is Uncle 'Enry.

MRS. WESTLAKE. But I don't want to be saved from him. Where is he?

HOBBS. 'Aving a bath!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Fetch him down at once!

CANON CONSIDINE. That's hardly a feasible proposition at the moment, Mrs. Westlake, but no doubt my brother will consent to meet you a little later in the morning. I trust you will overlook my son's romantic proposal! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. No, I will not overlook it. I accept it.

OMNES. You accept it! But! . . . You can't really mean . . .

HOBBS. Now, now, now, listen to reason! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. I accept your proposal, Geoffrey! . . .

HOBBS. Wait a minute. You 'ave another chance, you know. There's 'is Uncle 'Enry. What 'e said was, if 'is Uncle 'Enry didn't marry you, 'e would!

GEOFFREY. Uncle Henry had refused to marry her.

MRS. WESTLAKE. What! Refused to marry *me*!

GEOFFREY. Yes.

MRS. WESTLAKE. But I haven't asked him to marry me!

GEOFFREY. No, I did that.

MRS. WESTLAKE. You! . . . Really, Geoffrey, you seem to be very generous with what doesn't belong to you.

GEOFFREY. I felt it was the duty of one of us to . . . to . . . well, at least to get engaged to you. I thought Uncle Henry would realize that it was up to him, as he'd taken you out and lost you, but he refused, so I must marry you.

MRS. WESTLAKE. But don't you want to?

GEOFFREY. Oh, yes, of course . . . I want to . . . of course!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, I think you might be a little more enthusiastic about it. I don't want to marry anyone who isn't keen. I'm surprised at your Uncle Henry. After keeping me out all night with a lot of fish, and using language that no man ought to use to any woman who isn't his wife . . . I should have thought he'd be the first to propose to me. I never dreamt when I came here yesterday that this would happen to me! (*To* GEOFFREY.) When are we to be married?

GEOFFREY. I haven't thought of that yet.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, isn't it time you did? I must say I think the whole business has been arranged in a very casual manner. Chim!

HOBBS. No. I'm not on in this act.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I must have someone to look after my interests.

HOBBS. I'm a business man, not a matrimonial agent, and I don't want to get mixed up with any marriages.

MRS. CONSIDINE. This is all very ridiculous. Here we are, apparently intelligent, grown-up people, behaving like a lot of lunatics! . . .

HOBBS. That's romance, Mrs. Considine!

MRS. WESTLAKE. I was asked to marry Geoffrey, and as you all seemed to expect it of me, I agreed. I don't think I should be called a lunatic. I may be unselfish, but I am not mad.

[*The* MAID *enters.*

MRS. CONSIDINE. Yes, Jenny?

MAID. Please, ma'am, Sir Henry wants to know if he can speak to Mrs. Westlake alone for a few minutes. He isn't dressed! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Then I think you'd better all be present.

MAID. He's got his pyjamas and dressing-gown on, ma'am.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Very well! I'll see him!

MAID. Thank you, ma'am. (*Exit.*)

CANON CONSIDINE. I've never known Henry to behave like this before. He has always been a model of correctness and good taste. I'm afraid, Mrs. Westlake, you have a very disturbing effect on people. (*To his wife.*) Come, my dear! We'll go into the garden and leave Mrs. Westlake with Henry.

GEOFFREY. But I object to leaving her alone with him! That's how the trouble began.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I have only been engaged to you for five minutes, Geoffrey, but already you are treating me as your private property. I shall begin to talk like a suffragette in a minute. Kindly go into the garden with your father and mother, and take Chim with you. (*Exeunt* CANON *and* MRS. CONSIDINE.) What are you thinking about, Chim?

HOBBS (*who has been musing*). I was wondering how long it would take to get back to London.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, go and wonder in the garden.

HOBBS. This is the last time I ever come into the country!

[*Exeunt* GEOFFREY *and* HOBBS.

SHEILA (*after a pause*). Mrs. Westlake?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes.

SHEILA. Geoffrey doesn't want to marry you . . . not really. He wants to marry me.

MRS. WESTLAKE. What a pity he doesn't know it!

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SHEILA. He proposed to you . . . just out of . . . chivalry.

MRS. WESTLAKE. What a funny thing to do!

SHEILA. Couldn't you let him off?

MRS. WESTLAKE. No. He's asked me to marry him, and I will. His blood be on his own head.

SHEILA. I want him to marry me.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Evidently he doesn't share your wish.

SHEILA (*on the verge of tears*). You're frightfully hard, Mrs. Westlake! You don't mind what you do or say! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh!

SHEILA. He doesn't care for you really! . . . (*She breaks down completely.*) I'm frightfully miserable! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Why, you're crying!

SHEILA. I love him . . . that's all!!

MRS. WESTLAKE (*suddenly remorseful and generous*). Oh, my poor girl, I'm sorry I've been unkind to you. (*Puts her arm round* SHEILA.) I don't want to marry your Geoffrey! He's such a prig! . . .

SHEILA. But they all are at that age, if they're any good. I'm sure he'd fall in love with me, if you weren't here.

MRS. WESTLAKE. But isn't he in love with you already?

SHEILA. I don't know. I thought he was until you came. It's hard to tell nowadays whether a man's in love with you or just bored. Of course, if I thought you could make him happy! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. But I couldn't. Oh, I couldn't.

SHEILA. That's what I thought! So I hoped you'd marry Uncle Henry, if you had to marry anybody.

MRS. WESTLAKE. You don't mind whether he's happy or not?

SHEILA. Well, he's older than Geoffrey, and he's had so much experience of life out in Andabar.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I see!

SHEILA. If you could only bring yourself to marry Uncle Henry it would be awfully sporting of you!

MRS. WESTLAKE. I don't know that I'm quite so sporting as that, but I'll think about it.

SHEILA. Thank you. Thank you so much!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Now, run along!

[SHEILA *suddenly leans forward and kisses her.*

MRS. WESTLAKE. I think I hear him coming! . . .

[SHEILA *goes out.* MRS. WESTLAKE *shuts the windows behind her. While she is doing this,* SIR HENRY, *wearing a very flamboyant dressing-gown, black pyjamas and scarlet bedroom slippers, enters.*]

SIR HENRY. Mrs. Westlake . . . Mary! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE (*turning from the window*). Good heavens!

SIR HENRY. What's up?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, nothing! I've just realized why Joseph's brethren sold him into captivity.

SIR HENRY. Oh! Why?

MRS. WESTLAKE. His coat of many colours! What do you want?

SIR HENRY. I want to speak very seriously to you. Sit down, won't you?

MRS. WESTLAKE (*seating herself*). Very well!

SIR HENRY (*also seating himself*). I couldn't rest until I'd asked you to forgive me.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Forgive you!

SIR HENRY. Yes. While I was in my bath, I suddenly said to myself, "You've treated her abominably!" and I could hardly wait until I was dry before asking for your pardon.

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'm glad you were able to restrain yourself, Sir Henry!

SIR HENRY. Sir Henry? Oh, my dear Mary, I was Harry to you last night!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, but a great deal has happened since then.

SIR HENRY. I know. But why not let the dead past bury its dead. Mary, will you forgive me . . . and marry me?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Marry you?

SIR HENRY. Yes. Forgive me and be my wife.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Really, there seems to be something about this house! . . .

SIR HENRY. Mind you, I'm not asking you to marry me out of chivalry! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. I hope not.

SIR HENRY. Or to defend your character. I realize

that that is impossible. I don't quite mean what I seem to be saying. What I mean is, I want you to marry me for a purely selfish reason. Because it would be very nice for me.

MRS. WESTLAKE. How well you put it!

SIR HENRY. Will you marry me?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Sir Henry! . . .

SIR HENRY. No, no, no! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Very well, then . . . Harry! I will!

SIR HENRY (*embracing her*). Thank you. Thank you, my dear! Now, I can go back to bed with a clear conscience!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Hadn't we better tell the others?

SIR HENRY. Yes, we might as well!

MRS. WESTLAKE (*after she has opened the windows*). Coo-ee! Coo-ee! (*She returns to the centre of the room.*) They'll all be very surprised to hear the news . . . especially Geoffrey!

SIR HENRY. I expect so.

[*The others return.*

MRS. WESTLAKE (*when they are all present*). Would you mind shutting the windows, Geoffrey? I'm afraid the draught may be bad for Harry! (SIR HENRY *coos with pleasure.* GEOFFREY *shuts the windows. As he does so* MRS. WESTLAKE *says.*) Thank you! I've called you all in to say that Sir Henry has proposed to me!

GEOFFREY. What?

[*Exclamations from the others.*

HOBBS. It's something in the air, you know. That's what it is.

MRS. WESTLAKE. And I've accepted him.

GEOFFREY. But you're engaged to me!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Good heavens, Harry, I forgot to tell you that I'm engaged to Geoffrey. I suppose I'd better break it off!

SIR HENRY. My dear Mary! . . .

GEOFFREY. Look here, Uncle Henry, this is the second time you've butted into my affairs! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. It's really your fault, Chim. You're my business manager, but you wouldn't help me! . . .

HOBBS. It isn't my fault if you go and accept engagements without looking at your contracts.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, what's to be done?

GEOFFREY. Uncle Henry can go back to Andabar or anywhere else he likes, and you'll marry me!

MRS. WESTLAKE. But won't that be awfully hard on poor Harry?

SIR HENRY. Of course, it will. And I'm not going to let it happen to me. It was very careless of you, Mary, to get engaged to me before you'd broken off with Geoffrey, but since you forgot! . . .

CANON CONSIDINE. A very singular thing to forget, I must say!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, people do forget things, Canon!

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, but an engagement! I used to think this parish was very restful, but since yesterday it has become almost licentious. I can't understand what's happened. I don't know now whether you're engaged to Geoffrey or Henry or to no one. Now, my dear lady, do try to think seriously about solemn things. To which of them are you betrothed?

MRS. WESTLAKE. I can't marry both of them! . . .

CANON CONSIDINE. You should have thought of that before becoming engaged to them simultaneously. I don't think it's nice to get engaged to people in such rapid succession. It's a sign of the restlessness of our time : . . this craving for novelty.

MRS. WESTLAKE. It's not much of a novelty to be engaged to Harry. And now that we're engaged, Harry, you might go and get dressed.

SIR HENRY. But I haven't had any sleep!

HOBBS. I 'aven't 'ad any breakfast!

CANON CONSIDINE. None of us have had any breakfast!

GEOFFREY. You understand, Mary? I consider that you and I are still engaged, and I will not release you.

MRS. WESTLAKE. You're very obstinate, Geoffrey! Harry, you got me into this, so you must just get me out of it.

SIR HENRY. I got you into it?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes. If you hadn't proposed to me, I shouldn't have accepted you! . . .

SIR HENRY. But, God bless my soul, you don't accept everybody who proposes to you!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, nearly always! Unless, of course, there's something very wrong about them. People look so pathetic when they're proposing to you, and I haven't the heart to refuse them. I thought you looked absolutely pitiable when you asked me to marry you! . . .

SIR HENRY. Pitiable! Me?

MRS. WESTLAKE. And I felt so sorry for you!

SIR HENRY. Do you mean to say you accepted me out of pity?

MRS. WESTLAKE. I always accept people out of pity. What other reason is there for accepting them?

SIR HENRY. Well, I thought perhaps you cared for me.

MRS. WESTLAKE. So I do. I think you're very nice. *Very* nice! Just like Geoffrey and . . . and Chim! . . .

HOBBS. No . . . leave me out of it. I've never proposed to you, and with the help of Heaven, I never will!

MRS. WESTLAKE. All this talk doesn't solve my problem. Here I am engaged to two men at once, and they're both threatening to fight for me, and nobody does anything. You all stand about, looking on, and at any moment Geoffrey may kill Harry! . . .

SIR HENRY. It's just as likely to be the other way round. I see no reason why there should be any fighting at all, but if there is, I don't intend to be the corpse.

GEOFFREY. She's engaged to me, and that's final!

SIR HENRY. Mary, what do you say to this?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, so long as I'm engaged to somebody, I don't mind!

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, but to which of them? You can't be engaged to two men at once!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Why not? There's no law against being engaged to more than one person at once, particularly if you don't intend to marry them! . . .

GEOFFREY. You're not going to marry? . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Not both of you, darling! I think you're all very nice! You're young and handsome, and Harry's . . . very well-preserved!

HOBBS. Anybody'd think he was jam!

CANON CONSIDINE. Well, which of them is it to be? Geoffrey or Henry? Do, please, decide quickly! I'm feeling faint with hunger!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, my poor Canon, I'm keeping you from your breakfast. Supposing we settle it after we've had something to eat?

SIR HENRY. This is ludicrous! Mrs. Westlake, I release you from your engagement to me.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Are you going to jilt me?

SIR HENRY. No. I . . . I sacrifice myself. I give you up to . . . to Geoffrey.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Then I'm still engaged to you Geoffrey!

GEOFFREY. Thank you, Uncle Henry!

[*The sound of a gong is heard.*

MRS. WESTLAKE. Food. I hope there are mackerel for breakfast.

SIR HENRY. Mackerel! (*He goes out overcome by his emotions.*)

CANON CONSIDINE. Well, well, let's go in. My dear!

[MRS. CONSIDINE *and he go out, followed by* HOBBS.

GEOFFREY. Come along, Mary!

MRS. WESTLAKE. You go first! I'm coming with Sheila!

[*Exit* GEOFFREY.

SHEILA. Mrs. Westlake! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Wait, wait, silly girl! I haven't finished yet.

SHEILA. But you're engaged to Geoffrey!

MRS. WESTLAKE. At the moment, yes. But who knows to whom I shall be engaged this afternoon?

[*She puts her arm through* SHEILA'S *and they go out together.*]

THE FOURTH ACT

We are again in the garden—on the afternoon of the same day. CANON CONSIDINE *is seated in a corner, reading a magazine.* MRS. CONSIDINE, *carrying the garment on which she was working in the first act, enters from the house. As she does so, she sees her husband.*

MRS. CONSIDINE. Where are the others, Peter?

CANON CONSIDINE. Eh? (*Turning to her.*) Oh, I don't know, my dear, I don't know. (*She goes to the table and sits down, and he approaches her and speaks confidentially.*) Have you any idea how much longer Mrs. Westlake and Mr. Hobbs are going to stay?

MRS. CONSIDINE. I think they're going on Monday, but I shouldn't be disappointed if they went to-day!

CANON CONSIDINE. No. I hope I'm not inhospitable, but I'm afraid I'm not so anxious for interesting company as I used to be. (*He seats himself near her.*) I'm not happy about these engagements of Mrs. Westlake's. Do you know which of them is in force at the moment?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Geoffrey's, I think.

CANON CONSIDINE. I wish it were Henry's. He can hardly hope in the course of nature to live as long as Geoffrey.

[*The noise of an approaching motor-car is heard.*

MRS. CONSIDINE. Is that someone coming here?

CANON CONSIDINE. I hope not. (*He goes to the gates.*)

MRS. CONSIDINE. Who is it?

CANON CONSIDINE. A man!

[*The voice of* BEEBY *is heard off.*

BEEBY. Is this the Vicarage, sir?

CANON CONSIDINE. It is, and I'm the Vicar!

BEEBY. Is Mrs. Westlake here?

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes . . . *yes*, she is!

BEEBY. I want to see her very urgently. Will it be all right if I leave my car here?

CANON CONSIDINE. Oh, quite! Won't you come in?

BEEBY. Thank you!

[BEEBY, *a white-faced, rather flabby man, with a beard, enters. His age is about forty-seven. His clothes are good, but his figure is such that any distinction they might possess is taken from them.*]

BEEBY (*as he enters*). My name's Beeby!

CANON CONSIDINE. Mine is Considine. Let me introduce you to my wife. (*To* MRS. CONSIDINE.) My dear this is . . . er . . . (*To* BEEBY.) I'm sorry, but I didn't quite catch! . . .

BEEBY. Beeby, B-double-e-b-y!

CANON CONSIDINE. Oh yes! Beeby! My dear, Mr. Beeby is a friend of Mrs. Westlake!

MRS. CONSIDINE. How do you do?

BEEBY. I hope I'm not causing you any inconvenience, but I'm anxious to see Mrs. Westlake as soon as possible.

MRS. CONSIDINE. She's asleep at present

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes! You see she was out all night!

BEEBY. Really! Is that the custom down here?

CANON CONSIDINE. Oh, no! Oh, dear me, no! She went out in a boat and got lost.

BEEBY. Lost!

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, but she was found again. Of course, she is tired . . . anyone would be . . . but otherwise she's in her normal state of health.

BEEBY (*looking at his watch*). I must get back to London to-night, and I want to have an understanding with her before I go! . . .

CANON CONSIDINE. An understanding?

BEEBY. Yes, on a matter of very great importance.

CANON CONSIDINE. You'll pardon me for seeming to be inquisitive, Mr. Beeby, but are you by any chance engaged to her?

BEEBY. No!

CANON CONSIDINE. I'm sorry to hear that!

MRS. CONSIDINE. Never mind, Peter! Perhaps Mr. Beeby will be engaged to her before he goes back.

CANON CONSIDINE (*hopefully*). Yes . . . yes, perhaps!

BEEBY (*utterly bewildered*). Excuse me, but I don't quite understand. I've come down here on important business.

CANON CONSIDINE. That doesn't matter. The result will probably be the same. (HOBBS *enters from the road.*) Ah, here's Mr. Hobbs.

HOBBS. 'Illo, Beeby, old chap! 'Ow are you?

BEEBY. I've been hunting you all over the place. I got your address from the theatre, and came down by car. I heard that Mrs. Westlake's been out all night.

HOBBS (*dismally*). Yes, she 'as.

BEEBY. Well, is there any likelihood of her being out during the day?

HOBBS. I can't say. All I know is that when I expect 'er to be anywhere, she's not.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Peter, I'm sure Mr. Beeby and Mr. Hobbs would like to be alone! . . .

BEEBY. Oh please, I don't wish to drive you from your garden.

CANON CONSIDINE. That's quite all right! I want to finish an interesting article in this magazine, on the domestic habits of the giraffe. Do you know that the male giraffe has a most pungent smell?

HOBBS. No, I can't say I do.

CANON CONSIDINE. It's so pungent that merely touching the animal's tail or patting its skin causes the smell to remain perceptible on one's fingers for weeks!

HOBBS. I've never touched a giraffe's tail myself, but perhaps you're right.

CANON CONSIDINE. Nature's a very strange thing, Mr. Hobbs.

HOBBS. It is! I've often said that to Mrs. Westlake.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Come along, Peter!

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, my dear! (*He goes into the house.*)

MRS. CONSIDINE (*to* BEEBY). You'll stay to tea, won't you?

BEEBY. It's very kind of you to ask me! . . .

MRS. CONSIDINE. Not at all. (*To* HOBBS.) I leave you to look after your friend. (*Exit.*)

BEEBY. I say, Hobbs, what sort of a place is this?

HOBBS. Why?

BEEBY. Well, the moment I got inside the gate the old gentleman asked me if I were engaged to Mrs. Westlake!

HOBBS. Oh, that! That's nothing! It's 'er 'obby at present—collectin' fiancés! She got a couple this morning! What's this business of yours?

BEEBY. You remember that play I showed you?

HOBBS. The one about the baboon? Yes!

BEEBY. Well, I've got a splendid opening for it, and I want Mary to play the heroine. We can begin rehearsals next week.

HOBBS. It's no use, old chap! I've talked to 'er about it until I'm sick, but it's no use. She won't think of anything but the poetic drama! Poetic drama, Beeby! I ask you! In these times! . . .

BEEBY. What's the matter with her?

HOBBS. God knows! I don't! If I've told 'er once that the public 'as no use for poetry, I've told 'er fifty times. But she won't 'eed me. Your play'll make piles of money! . . .

BEEBY. I'm glad you think so!

HOBBS. Of course, I do. It's one of the rottenest plays I've ever read, but it'll be a terrific success. And then to see it turned down for a poetic drama about Joan of Arc. 'Oo the 'ell cares about 'er?

BEEBY. Then it isn't any good my offering her the part?

HOBBS. Better see 'er first. If I say she won't accept it, she's as likely as not to take it just to make me out a liar! . . .

BEEBY. Well, why not say that when she's listening?

HOBBS. That's a good idea! I will. 'Ow about terms?

BEEBY. Of course I can't give her what she deserves. . .

HOBBS. I'd like to see 'er getting it! (GEOFFREY *enters from the road.*) We'll talk about it later!

GEOFFREY. Hillo, Hobbs! Oh, I beg your pardon! I didn't see you had someone with you!

HOBBS. That's all right, old chap! This is Mr. Beeby —Mr. Geoffrey Considine. (*They murmur "How do do?"*

to each other.) You're both in the same line of business, really!

BEEBY. Are you a dramatist, too?

GEOFFREY. Well, I've written one play but it hasn't been produced yet.

HOBBS. 'E's the author of "Joan of Arc"—the piece I was telling you about!

BEEBY. Oh yes, yes! How interesting! I was ambitious, too, when I was young!

HOBBS (*to* GEOFFREY). Now 'e knows 'ow to do it! Many a time I've sat in the pit when one of 'is plays was on, and listened to the flappers' tears splashing on the floor.

BEEBY. I think I know how to reach the heart of the public. If I may give you a word of advice, Mr. Considine! . . .

GEOFFREY. I shall be very grateful.

BEEBY. It is this. Ignore the human head. Concentrate on the human heart. I have made a large fortune by completely ignoring the mind. You may be able to do the same.

GEOFFREY. Thanks, awfully!

HOBBS (*to* BEEBY). Come along, old chap! We'll go for a walk and discuss that little matter. You know, there's quite a lot to see in the country! . . .

[*He leads* BEEBY *off to the road.* GEOFFREY *stands watching them for a moment. Then he turns and goes towards the house. As he does so,* SHEILA *emerges from it.*]

GEOFFREY. Hillo, Sheila!

SHEILA. Are you alone, Geoffrey?

GEOFFREY. Yes. Why?

SHEILA. I want to talk to you. Are you serious about your engagement to Mrs. Westlake?

GEOFFREY. Perfectly!

SHEILA. Do you really love her?

GEOFFREY. Of course I do. I'm enormously impressed by her.

SHEILA. She's older than you!

GEOFFREY. That doesn't matter. Women are always older than men nowadays. Why do you ask me these questions?

SHEILA. Because—well, I hoped that you'd become engaged to me! There! It's out. (*She seats herself at the table.*)

GEOFFREY. To you? My dear Sheila, what put that idea into your head?

SHEILA. I'm rather fond of you. That's all!

GEOFFREY. Fond of me—like that?

SHEILA. Yes.

GEOFFREY. Do you mean to say you're in love with me?

SHEILA. Yes, I am . . . very much in love with you.

GEOFFREY. But how damned funny!

SHEILA. I don't think it's funny at all. It's perfectly natural.

GEOFFREY. Well, yes, perhaps it is. But you've practically proposed to me! . . .

SHEILA. That isn't funny! Queen Victoria proposed to Prince Albert, and nobody'd say she was funny!

GEOFFREY. Of course I'm fond of you, Sheila! . . .

SHEILA. Like that?

GEOFFREY. No, I'm not in love with you. I like you.

SHEILA. Don't you think you might get to love me in time?

GEOFFREY. I don't know. Of course, I shall always feel for you! . . .

SHEILA. Don't say you're going to be a brother to me! I couldn't bear that!

GEOFFREY. I realize what an honour you've done me in asking me to marry you. I've always said that the highest compliment any woman can pay a man is to ask him to be her husband. I'm sorry, Sheila, but it can't be.

SHEILA. Very well, Geoffrey! You know that my only wish is for your happiness.

GEOFFREY. Thank you! It's generous of you to say that—very generous!

[*They shake hands. Then he kisses her on the brow, and goes into the house.* SHEILA *walks towards the gate. As she does so,* MRS. WESTLAKE *puts her head out of a window.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE. Sheila!

SHEILA. Yes! Oh, it's you!

MRS. WESTLAKE. It is. I think you did that very badly.

SHEILA. Were you listening?

MRS. WESTLAKE. My dear, I'm always listening. Fancy quoting Queen Victoria to a Georgian poet! It's indelicate, darling! Have you seen a person called Beeby about?

SHEILA. No.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Your aunt told me he was asking for me. I hope he hasn't come to propose to me again.

SHEILA. Has he proposed to you before?

MRS. WESTLAKE. My dear, he never stops. If he does it again, I shall accept him! And you know he really *loathes* me. Because I make fun of him. I suppose he thinks that if I were to marry him, I'd stop making fun of him, but I shouldn't. He'd simply be funnier.

SHEILA. He must be a very strange man. What's he like?

MRS. WESTLAKE. He collects stamps. If you didn't know he was a dramatist, you'd think he sold pencils.

[SIR HENRY *enters from the house.*

SHEILA (*to* MRS. WESTLAKE). Here's Uncle Henry!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Good afternoon, Harry!

SIR HENRY (*gloomily*). Good afternoon!

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'm glad to see you're awake again.

SIR HENRY. Awake! Ha! Awake!!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Haven't you had a good sleep?

SIR HENRY. No.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, I should go back to bed again, if I were you.

SIR HENRY. If you were me, you wouldn't care whether you ever slept again or not.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Harry, you've been reading Ethel M. Dell. You're so neurotic.

SIR HENRY. Is that what you say to a man who is suffering as you've made me suffer?

SHEILA. Excuse me, but if you're going to have a heart-to-heart talk, I think I'd better leave you.

MRS. WESTLAKE. How tactful of you, darling! But you needn't go! Your Uncle Henry isn't suffering on

my account. No, Henry, you're not—not half as much as you'd suffer if I were to marry you. You're a self-indulgent old man! . . .

SIR HENRY. Old man!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, you aren't young!

SIR HENRY. A man isn't old just because he isn't young. People go about nowadays talking as if it were a criminal offence to be over fifty! There are just as many young fools in the world as there are old ones.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Do you hear that, Sheila? It's quite true. All the old fools used to be young fools. Henry, I'd be engaged to you again, but Geoffrey simply wouldn't believe it. You know how incredulous the younger generation is.

SHEILA. I'm quite sure Geoffrey doesn't want to be engaged to you.

MRS. WESTLAKE. That may be, but it's so difficult to make him believe it.

[GEOFFREY *enters from the house*

GEOFFREY. What's this? A political meeting or a religious revival? Come for a walk, Mary!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Geoffrey, your Uncle Henry has something to say to you. Don't say it until I come out, Harry!

[*She disappears from the window.*

GEOFFREY. Well, Uncle Henry, what do you want to say to me?

SIR HENRY. I have nothing to say to you, Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY. But Mary said! . . .

SIR HENRY. Mrs. Westlake says many things which are not strictly accurate. I should have thought you'd know that by this time, Geoffrey.

[*Enter* MRS. WESTLAKE *from the house.*

GEOFFREY. Uncle Henry says you don't speak the truth!

SIR HENRY. I never said anything of the sort.

GEOFFREY. You said she was incapable of stating a fact accurately. Didn't he, Sheila?

SHEILA. You said something like that, Uncle Henry.

SIR HENRY. I absolutely deny it. Mrs. Westlake . . . Mary! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. No one has ever called me a liar before!

SIR HENRY. This is outrageous!

[*Enter* HOBBS *and* BEEBY *from the road.*

MRS. WESTLAKE (*to* HOBBS). Chim, do I tell lies?

HOBBS. Yes!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh—h—h! . . .

HOBBS. 'Ere's Beeby!

MRS. WESTLAKE. How do you do? (*Then in a raised voice.*) I may not always speak the truth, but I do *not* tell lies.

HOBBS. Beeby wants to know! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. It's so degrading to tell lies. It implies that you are afraid to tell the truth, and I'm not. I've always said to myself, "No matter how much it annoys your friends, tell the truth!" (*To* HOBBS.) What's this man Beeby want?

BEEBY. Oh . . . I . . . er! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Don't stammer, man. You've been connected with the stage for years, but you still do not know how to articulate.

BEEBY. Really, Mrs. Westlake! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. First, I'm accused of telling lies! And on top of that, you begin to stutter! What do you want?

BEEBY. To offer you a part.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Offer *me* a part in one of *your* plays! (*To* HOBBS.) What's the salary? (HOBBS *whispers to her.*) No, it's not enough!

BEEBY. Not enough! Why!

MRS. WESTLAKE. I want a heavier bribe than that.

GEOFFREY. But, Mary! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Hold your tongue, Geoffrey! Chim, take Beeby out for another walk, and don't come back until he's agreed to pay much more.

BEEBY. You're being very arbitrary! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Of course I am. How would anyone know I'm a great actress if I weren't?

BEEBY. But it isn't the way to speak to me! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Sssshooo! (*She shoos him away.*)

HOBBS (*at the gate*). Come on, Beeby. 'Ave another walk.

BEEBY. But I protest, Hobbs, I absolutely protest! . . .

[*He goes off protesting, led by* HOBBS.

GEOFFREY. Mary, you wouldn't act in Beeby's rubbishy plays, would you?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Only for money, dear. Not for anything else.

GEOFFREY. But! . . . Oh, no, you couldn't. You're too great an artist to waste your talent . . . your genius . . . on such twaddle.

MRS. WESTLAKE. How very charming of you to say that! And how untrue it is! Harry, you may now tell Geoffrey what you wanted to say to him.

SIR HENRY. But I don't want to say anything.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, you do, but you're too shy. (*To* GEOFFREY.) He thinks that you and I are unsuited to each other! . . .

GEOFFREY (*making a step towards* SIR HENRY). Now, look here, Uncle Henry! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE (*restraining him*). And so I release you from your engagement.

GEOFFREY. You will do nothing of the kind. You're doing it simply out of good nature, because they've persuaded you that you ought to, but I won't let you sacrifice yourself. Uncle Henry, understand, once and for all, Mary will not marry you. She can't bear you, and I'm beginning to dislike you myself.

MRS. WESTLAKE. My dear boy, we ought all to love our relatives. We may not be able to do anything else for them! . . .

SIR HENRY (*interrupting her*). I don't want Geoffrey's love. I want yours.

MRS. WESTLAKE (*with a shrug of the shoulders*). You can't have everything you want. You were out in the boat last night, and you mustn't be greedy!

SIR HENRY. I don't care that (*snapping his fingers*) for Geoffrey. If he has the bad taste to dislike me, well! . . . (*A gesture to denote how indifferent he is.*)

MRS. WESTLAKE. That's exactly how I feel!

SIR HENRY. I do not propose to remain here discussing this matter any longer. (*He goes towards the path leading*

down to the beach.) I am going for a walk, Sheila. Would you like to come with me?

SHEILA. No, thanks, Uncle Henry.

MRS. WESTLAKE. You're not very popular with your descendants, Harry.

SIR HENRY. They're not my descendants. Thank God, I haven't got any.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Are you going out in a boat?

SIR HENRY. No, I am not.

MRS. WESTLAKE. What a pity! Because I'd have come with you, if you had been.

SIR HENRY. That's a threat which I shall treat with disdain! Good afternoon! (*Exit.*)

MRS. WESTLAKE. What ingratiating manners he has! Geoffrey, you're going to take me for a walk, aren't you?

GEOFFREY. Yes, please.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, go and find my sunshade for me. I think I left it upstairs.

GEOFFREY. Righto! (*He goes into the house.*)

MRS. WESTLAKE (*to* SHEILA). Now, what are we to do?

SHEILA. You must just refuse to marry him.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, my dear, but it'll have to be done in such a way that you'll catch him on the rebound. I must disgust him with me somehow. He won't believe it if I say I don't love him. His vanity won't let him.

SHEILA. Why don't you marry Uncle Henry? He's quite a nice man if you make allowances for him?

MRS. WESTLAKE. People have to make allowances for me, Sheila, and it would be very awkward to have two people in the same house being allowed for. Besides, I don't care for him.

SHEILA. But you got engaged to him.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, when one goes into the country, one has to do something. If I were interested in gardening, I don't suppose I should get engaged so often as I do, but I'm not. No, I shall have to hurt Geoffrey's pride. And if you are able to soothe it for him—the trick's done. I wonder if he'll ever fall in love with you.

SHEILA. I think, in time, I can break him in!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Break him in!

SHEILA. Yes. We modern girls know perfectly well that men don't really love us, and the best we hope for is that they'll get accustomed to us and won't mind our being married to them. Geoffrey says it's a terrible strain for a man to live with a woman, but I always say it's just as great a strain for her to live with him—only she makes greater much efforts to conceal it.

MRS. WESTLAKE. "O wise young judge—how I do honour thee!"

SHEILA. I don't quite understand! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Only a quotation, my dear, from Shakespeare.

[*Enter* GEOFFREY, *carrying her sunshade.*

GEOFFREY. Here's your sunshade.

[*The* MAID *enters from the house, with a teacloth which she spreads on the table.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE. Thank you, Geoffrey. (*To the* MAID.) Oh, are we going to have tea out here?

MAID. Yes, ma'am!

MRS. WESTLAKE. How nice! Geoffrey we can't go far. We mustn't be late for tea.

GEOFFREY. All right! We'll pick up Hobbs and Beeby and fetch them back.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Won't you come with us, Sheila?

SHEILA. No, I'll stay here, thanks!

MRS. WESTLAKE. *Au revoir*, then!

[*Geoffrey and she go out by the gate. They have hardly gone, when* CANON CONSIDINE, *still carrying his magazine, enters from the house. He meets the* MAID, *who is going to fetch the tea-things.*]

CANON CONSIDINE. Will tea be long, Jenny?

MAID. Not very long, sir. (*Exit.*)

CANON CONSIDINE. Is that you, Sheila?

SHEILA. Yes, Uncle.

CANON CONSIDINE. Do you know that the giraffe, when hard pressed, can travel at the rate of thirty miles an hour?

SHEILA. No, Uncle, I didn't know.

CANON CONSIDINE. Unfortunately, it can only keep that speed up for two miles, so I can't see that it's much good to it. Will there be any honey for tea, do you think?

SHEILA. I expect so. I'll ask Jenny.

[*The* MAID *returns with the tea-things, which she proceeds to put upon the table.*]

CANON CONSIDINE. Oh, by the way, my dear, there's another theatrical here . . . a person called Peepy or something of that sort ! . . .

SHEILA. I've seen him, Uncle. His name is Beeby !

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, so he says.

SHEILA (*to* MAID). Did Mrs. Considine tell you there'll be a visitor to tea, Jenny ?

MAID. Yes, miss. We've had a lot of visitors lately, miss, haven't we ? Just like the war-times, I call it. You never knew who'd be billeted on you then, did you ?

[*Enter* MRS. CONSIDINE *from the house.*

MRS. CONSIDINE. Everything ready, Jenny ?

MAID. Yes, ma'am. (*Exit.*)

[*Enter* GEOFFREY *from the road.*

MRS. CONSIDINE. Come along, Geoffrey, it's tea-time. Where are the others.

GEOFFREY. I left Mary talking to Beeby about his play. Hobbs is throwing stones into the sea. He's got an idea that if he throws enough he'll reduce the size of the ocean.

MRS. CONSIDINE. You don't seem very cheerful, darling, considering how engaged you are.

CANON CONSIDINE. In my opinion, people nowadays get engaged simply to annoy each other.

GEOFFREY. I don't like that man, Beeby. If ever anyone looked like a boiled worm, he does ! He's been telling me how to write plays ever since he met me. If I wrote the sort of muck he writes, I'd go into the Civil Service.

[HOBBS *enters from the road.*

MRS. CONSIDINE. Ah, Mr. Hobbs, you've come in time for tea.

HOBBS. I always do. I've a sort of instinct about food. You know, Mrs. Considine, it appals me when I sit down on the beach and look at all that water 'eavin' and 'eavin'. What's the good of it !

CANON CONSIDINE. It has a variety of uses, Mr. Hobbs. We get fish out of it, for example ! . . .

HOBBS. I don't like fish! No, all that water is just waste. I've come to the conclusion that this world 'as not been properly 'andled . . . all respect to your profession, of course. If I 'ad 'ad the managing of it, there wouldn't a-been so much water about, occupying good space.

[*Enter* MRS. WESTLAKE, *followed by* BEEBY, *from the road.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, tea, tea, tea! How nice! (*She goes up to the table and examines the edibles.*) Oh—h—h! Cucumber sandwiches!

CANON CONSIDINE. And honey!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Do you like honey?

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes, I do! I'm a regular bee!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, you can have my honey if I can have your cucumber. Where's Sir Henry?

SHEILA. He went for a walk!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, if he doesn't come back, perhaps I can have his cucumber, too! (*The* MAID *enters with the teapot, and places it in front of* MRS. CONSIDINE, *and then goes out.*) Mr. Beeby thinks the scenery about here is not quite so good as the scenery in his last play. He doesn't like the lighting effects.

CANON CONSIDINE. I'm sorry to hear that, but I'm afraid we can't alter it.

MRS. WESTLAKE. That's what I said; Beeby proposes, but God disposes.

[MRS. CONSIDINE *is pouring out tea, which is handed round by* GEOFFREY. BEEBY *is busy with sandwiches and bread and butter.*]

BEEBY. I only said it was a pity the irrelevant features of any landscape could not be removed. I am still of that opinion.

[SIR HENRY *enters.*

MRS. WESTLAKE. Good afternoon, Sir Henry!

SIR HENRY. Thank you!

[*He helps himself to food and sits down moodily near* MRS. CONSIDINE, *who gives him a cup of tea.* SHEILA *takes a plate of sandwiches to* MRS. WESTLAKE.]

MRS. WESTLAKE (*aside to* SHEILA). I've thought of a plan!

SHEILA (*eagerly*). Have you?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Hsssssh! Just you wait and see!

[SHEILA *goes away.*

MRS. CONSIDINE (*to* BEEBY). I hope you've settled your business with Mrs. Westlake satisfactorily, Mr. Beeby?

BEEBY. No, I can't say I have! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, yes, you have. I've accepted your offer!

[BEEBY, *who is in the act of drinking some tea, is so staggered by this announcement that he chokes.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE. Pat his back, Chim! He mustn't choke himself before he's signed the agreement.

[*When* BEEBY *recovers from his choking and* HOBBS'S *patting, he gets up and goes to* MRS. WESTLAKE, *still carrying his cup in one hand and a piece of bread and butter in the other.*]

BEEBY. Do you mean to say? . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, I do.

BEEBY. Oh, thank you, Mary, thank you! (*He offers her first the bread-and-butter hand, then the cup-of-tea hand. He puts the tea and the bread and butter on the table, and takes her hands in his.*) I knew you were really reasonable. I told Hobbs so, but he wouldn't believe me! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Chim!

HOBBS. No, and I don't believe it now neither!

GEOFFREY (*to* MRS. WESTLAKE). Are you going to act in his play?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, darling!

GEOFFREY. But what about "Joan of Arc"?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, I've changed my mind about that. After all, Chim is right No one would ever believe I was only thirteen. So I shan't be able to do it.

GEOFFREY. Won't be able to do it! . . .

SHEILA. Oh, Mrs. Westlake, you can't mean that! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, I do. And that reminds me, we must go back to town immediately!

[*General consternation.*

HOBBS } What!
MRS. CONSIDINE } Back to town!
SIR HENRY } But I thought! . . .
CANON CONSIDINE } Aren't you staying until Monday?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, I must go back to town at once because I'm going to act in Mr. Beeby's extraordinary play. Mr. Beeby always writes extraordinary plays, but this is the most extraordinary he's ever written. Oh, may I have another sandwich, please? (*Someone helps her.*)

GEOFFREY. Are you going to turn down my play for . . . for Beeby's?

MRS. WESTLAKE (*her mouth full of sandwich*). Yes, dearest, but you won't mind, will you? We shall make such a lot of money out of it.

GEOFFREY. Won't mind! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, you wouldn't like people to say I'd taken your play just because we're engaged!

CANON CONSIDINE. Are you still engaged to him?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, yes. Didn't you know?

CANON CONSIDINE. But I thought that was this morning!

MRS. WESTLAKE. This is a long engagement. Isn't it funny? I'm engaged *to* Geoffrey, and engaged *by* Beeby!

GEOFFREY. I'd much rather it was the other way about!

MRS. WESTLAKE. The other way about! Do you wish I were engaged to *him*! (*Pointing to* BEEBY.)

BEEBY (*in an agitation*). Really, I protest! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Sit down! Geoffrey, is that so?

GEOFFREY. Well, I'd rather you jilted me for Uncle Henry even than chucked my play for Beeby's!

SIR HENRY. That's very nice of you, Geoffrey!

BEEBY. What's wrong with my play?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Now, I begin to understand. You don't love me at all. You simply asked me to marry you to get your play produced! . . .

GEOFFREY. No, no! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, yes. It's perfectly plain! And I suppose, if the play were off, my engagement would be off, too!

GEOFFREY. Really, Mary! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Don't try to justify yourself. You ask me down here, into the very depths of the country, and induce me to go into a boat with your Uncle Henry, who takes me out and loses me! . . .

SIR HENRY. I didn't lose you. You lost me!

MRS. WESTLAKE. And then you all raise a scandal about it! You actually let Miss Mimms bring her Girl Guides here to annoy me! (*The* CONSIDINES *rise en masse to protest, but she will not listen to them.*) And the whole thing is simply a plot to get Geoffrey's play produced!

GEOFFREY. It's absolutely untrue!

MRS. WESTLAKE. That's the second time I've been called a liar this afternoon—first by your Uncle Henry and now by you!

SIR HENRY. I give it up! I absolutely give it up!

GEOFFREY. Mary, please let me explain! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. I never listen to explanations!

SIR HENRY. Won't you listen to reason, then?

MRS. WESTLAKE. No. There isn't any! Chim, we're going back to town at once. Go and get ready!

HOBBS. But I 'aven't finished tea yet?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Since when have you been addicted to tea? Do as I tell you! Mr. Beeby, you have a car!

BEEBY. Yes; it's outside!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Is it large enough for Chim and me?

BEEBY. It holds me all right!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Will it hold us?

BEEBY. Oh, yes, but! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Very well. We'll return to town in your car. Chim, go and pack your things!

GEOFFREY. Mary, you can't go like this! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Can't I? Just you wait and see. You made me care for you . . . oh, yes, you did . . . and all the time you were thinking of nothing but your play! . . .

GEOFFREY. I assure you! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. I won't listen to another word! I've done with you!

[*She runs up the steps into the house. The others look about them in dismay.*]

HOBBS. 'Ow did this all begin?

CANON CONSIDINE. I don't know. We were talking about cucumber sandwiches, and then suddenly . . . passion, anger, recrimination.

HOBBS. Well, I suppose I better go and get ready.

(*Goes up the steps.*) There's no doubt about it; I earn my salary! (*He goes into the house.*)

GEOFFREY. Mother!

MRS. CONSIDINE. For goodness' sake, don't say anything, or she'll change her mind and stay!

CANON CONSIDINE. Judging by experience, I should say she has probably changed her mind already!

BEEBY. She is a very unusual woman. I do not know any human being whom I detest so much as I detest her! . . .

SIR HENRY. But you want her to act in your play?

BEEBY. Yes. She has few rivals as an actress.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Thank heaven, she hasn't many as a woman! This house has been like a lunatic asylum ever since she came into it. I think she's perfectly detestable!

GEOFFREY. You forget that I am engaged to her.

SIR HENRY. No, you're not. She's thrown up her part.

GEOFFREY. That was only because I'd wounded her pride. You all heard her saying she cared for me! . . .

BEEBY. She cares for you in exactly the same way that a wolf cares for a lamb!

GEOFFREY (*angrily*). Look here, Beeby! . . .

BEEBY (*retreating*). Don't you threaten me!

MRS. CONSIDINE. Geoffrey!

GEOFFREY. Yes, mother?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Aren't you forgetting yourself, my dear? Mr. Beeby is a guest in our house!

GEOFFREY. I beg your pardon, Beeby!

BEEBY. It's my fault. I ought to know better. I've had much more experience of her than you've had. Mrs. Considine, will you believe me when I tell you that that woman was once engaged to me?

CANON CONSIDINE. I thought you must be in it somehow!

GEOFFREY. Engaged to you! To *you*!

BEEBY. Yes. It was the most humiliating experience I've ever had. The fact that I am not now married to her is absolute proof to me that there is a Merciful God!

CANON CONSIDINE. Have you any idea how many predecessors my son has had?

BEEBY. No—none!

SIR HENRY. It's a comfort to me to think that I came *after* Geoffrey—not *before* him.

[MRS. WESTLAKE, *in outdoor clothes, enters from the house, all smiles.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE. I forgot to finish my tea! I was in the middle of the sweetest little cucumber sandwich when Geoffrey got so cross, and I had to run away! (*She finds the remnant of the sandwich on her plate.*) There it is! Nyummmm! (*She eats the sandwich.*) I love cucumber sandwiches! Don't you, Sir Henry?

SIR HENRY. Love, Mrs. Westlake, is a word which I prefer to use for higher things than cucumbers!

MRS. WESTLAKE. You're quite right! I deserve the rebuke. I don't choose my language so carefully as you do. I realized that last night when we were out in the boat together!

GEOFFREY. Mary! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. No, Geoffrey, it's no good. My decision is ir—ir—what's that long word which means that you won't change your mind? Irrevocable! That's it! My decision is irrevocable! Besides, I shall make much more money out of Beeby's play than I could possibly make out of yours!

GEOFFREY. Money!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes. I must have lots of money. I cost myself so much more than I did before the war! Why don't you write plays like his? (*Points to* BEEBY.)

GEOFFREY. Plays like Beeby's! . . . I beg your pardon, Beeby!

BEEBY. Don't apologize. I've heard it all before!

MRS. WESTLAKE. After all, it's very pleasant to be a popular author, and much more comfortable than being famous.

GEOFFREY. I have no wish to be comfortable.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, how unnatural! That makes me more convinced than ever that you and I would not be happy together. If I were at all comfortable, I should feel certain that you were reproaching me . . . silently, perhaps . . . which would be much worse than if you said it out loud. And I couldn't endure that.

GEOFFREY. I should never reproach you for anything.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Then you wouldn't be a suitable husband for me. If I were married to a poor but famous poet who never reproached me for anything, I think I should lose my temper every day. And that wouldn't be nice for either of us. Besides, I'm not sure that I shan't marry Beeby after all! . . .

BEEBY (*in terrible agitation*). Oh, please, please! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes, I think I shall marry you . . . but not just at present. I still have years of active life in front of me.

BEEBY. But I'm not worthy of you, Mary! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. I know you're not, but you make a great deal of money! . . .

GEOFFREY. Money, money!!!

MRS. WESTLAKE. How nice that sounds!

BEEBY. I call upon you all to witness that I have not asked her to marry me. If she does marry me, it will be entirely against my will! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Don't snivel, Beeby! . . . Oh, how can I ever bring myself to bear the name of Beeby!

BEEBY. Don't, don't! It's a dreadful name.

MRS. WESTLAKE. You must change it! . . .

BEEBY. But I shall have a Beeby nature!

MRS. WESTLAKE. How terribly true that is! (*She turns to* SIR HENRY.) Harry, I'm half inclined to marry you, after all.

SIR HENRY. Well, why not?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Geoffrey, I'll be an aunt to you!

GEOFFREY. You're absolutely heartless! You're the most flippant, cruel woman I've ever known! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Really! What a cross little boy you are, Geoffrey!

GEOFFREY. I'm glad I found out about you . . . in time!

[*He goes towards the back entrance to the garden.*

MRS. WESTLAKE. Aren't you going to see me off?

GEOFFREY. I don't want ever to see you again.

MRS. CONSIDINE. Geoffrey, my dear! . . .

GEOFFREY. It's all right, mother. Don't worry about me. I'm just going for a walk across the Common. I'll be back to dinner!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Well, good-bye, Geoffrey.

[GEOFFREY *turns towards her, and is about to speak to her. Then he changes his mind and leaves without a word.*]

MRS. WESTLAKE. How very sad!

MRS. CONSIDINE. Mrs. Westlake, you've treated my son very . . . very cruelly.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Yes. (*Turning to* BEEBY *and* HOBBS.) Well, now, what about getting ready?

SHEILA. Mrs. Westlake please! . . .

MRS. WESTLAKE. Ssshhh! I couldn't do it any other way!

SHEILA. But I don't want his play to be turned down for my sake! . . .

MRS. CONSIDINE. What do you mean, Sheila?

MRS. WESTLAKE. It's all right, Mrs. Considine! It's quite all right!

SHEILA. No, it isn't. The whole thing's my fault. I asked her to help me to marry Geoffrey.

SIR HENRY. That's how I got into my mess!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Did you make love to me merely to oblige Sheila?

SIR HENRY. I started off with that intention, but I ended by trying to oblige myself.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Thank you, Harry. You said that very nicely!

SHEILA. But I'd rather die an old maid than have Geoffrey's play turned down.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Listen! I'm going to tell you all a little secret! Gather round! (*They do so.*) I haven't turned his play down. I've only postponed its production!

MRS. CONSIDINE } Postponed! . . .
SIR HENRY } Then you *are* going to do it?
SHEILA } Oh, Mrs Westlake! . . .

CANON CONSIDINE. I really do not know whether I am on my head or on my heels.

MRS. WESTLAKE. Listen again! My production of Geoffrey's play will be my wedding present to Sheila.

CANON CONSIDINE. But she isn't getting married!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Oh, yes, she is. She's going to marry Geoffrey! He doesn't know it yet, but she does.

When you're safely engaged to him, my dear (*this to* SHEILA) I'll send you a contract for the play, and when he signs the register in church the day you're married, you can ask him to sign the contract too. We can kill two birds with one stone.

BEEBY. But what about my play?

MRS. WESTLAKE. I shall make all the money out of your play that I'm going to lose on Geoffrey's!

SIR HENRY. Then the whole of this scene this afternoon has been humbug!

[*Enter* HOBBS, *overcoated and carrying a portmanteau.*

MRS. WESTLAKE. Quite!

BEEBY. I trust you do not consider yourself engaged to me?

MRS. WESTLAKE. Engaged to you! Now, why on earth should I get engaged to you?

BEEBY. I don't know. But you're quite capable of it. Isn't she, Hobbs?

HOBBS. No. That's the one thing in the world she's not capable of.

[*Enter the* MAID.

MAID (*to* MRS. WESTLAKE). Your things are ready, ma'am. They've been taken down by the back-way!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Thank you! (*Exit* MAID.) Chim, you and Mr. Beeby can go and get the car ready.

HOBBS. Right! Come on, Beeby!

CANON CONSIDINE. You'll have a nice run home.

HOBBS. I shan't believe we're gone until I'm there.

[BEEBY, HOBBS, *and* CANON CONSIDINE *go out together, and almost immediately the noise of the engine starting is heard.*]

MRS. CONSIDINE. Mrs. Westlake, I'm afraid I've been thinking very hard things about you!

MRS. WESTLAKE. I'm sure you have. I'd have been thinking them myself in similar circumstances.

[HOBBS *returns.*

HOBBS. We're ready when you are!

MRS. WESTLAKE. Good-bye, Mrs. Considine. It's been such a restful time here. I envy you the quiet of the country. Good-bye, Sheila!

SHEILA. You're a dear! (*Kissing her.*)

MRS. WESTLAKE. No, I'm an actress, and I like to make a good exit! . . . You must be very sympathetic with Geoffrey to-night!

SHEILA. I will.

MRS. WESTLAKE. But don't be modern. Be as old-fashioned as you can. Good-bye, Sir Henry!

SIR HENRY. May I consider that you are engaged to me?

MRS. WESTLAKE. I wonder! You see, Harry, you're such a bad sailor!

[*They move towards the gate, amid a babble of "Good-byes," and the stage is left empty for a moment. The noise of a car starting is heard. Then a loud chorus of "Good-byes," followed by "Give my love to Miss Mimms!" from* MRS. WESTLAKE. *Then* SIR HENRY, *followed by* CANON *and* MRS. CONSIDINE, *return to the garden.*]

CANON CONSIDINE. And now what are we going to do for the rest of the day?

SIR HENRY. I know what I'm going to do.

CANON CONSIDINE. What?

SIR HENRY. Sleep!

[*He goes into the house.* SHEILA *enters from the road.*

SHEILA. Well, they've gone!

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes! It's been quite an experience, hasn't it?

SHEILA. Oh, quite! Geoffrey said he was going over the Common, didn't he?

MRS. CONSIDINE. Yes, my dear! Why?

SHEILA. Oh, nothing!

[*She goes out by the back way.*

CANON CONSIDINE. And now, dear, supposing we finish tea?

MRS. CONSIDINE. In peace and quietness!

CANON CONSIDINE. Yes. Do you think you could spread a little honey on some bread and butter for me?

MRS. CONSIDINE. I think I could! . . .

(*And the play ends as she spreads it.*)

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